

Join the Club

23 June 2021



A few years ago, a Christian comedian uploaded two videos spoofing reality shows where contestants try to find the perfect house. In his videos, an entitled millennial couple is trying to find the perfect church to join. The host walks them through the different selling points of each church. *"There's a bunch of side exits,"* the host points out to the husband in one foyer, *"so if you need to leave early and catch the game, you can do that."* The wife, trying to describe what kind of preaching she's looking for, muses, *"We're looking for a more inspirational-type sermon."* Her husband quickly interrupts, *"... like a TedTalk with Bible verses!"*

Of course, it was all a joke, but the reason it resonated (the first video has two million views and counting) is that, like all good comedy, it rings true at some level. Satire works when it simply amplifies reality, and the depiction of judgmental, self-seeking people bending the church to their desires is scarily realistic. *"Funny, but sadly accurate,"* one commenter wrote below the clip. *"I laughed. I cried,"* someone else posted. *"God help us."*

The Compromise of the 21st Century Church

Judgement begins with the family of God, states 1 Peter 4:17. And what we're witnessing across the western church is God's cleansing judgement on His household for the dereliction of its duty to make sure that people join it on God's terms, not their own. The global pandemic has [decimated meeting attendance](#) around the world but also exposed what was already in people's hearts and minds. It's revealed what many really thought about joining churches and being members. For all the legitimacy of wanting to keep each other safe and be good citizens during the pandemic, there are now many who could gather together but simply refuse to – often because they were originally welcomed in at their convenience. If the church was already so desperate to welcome anyone on their own terms back then – in a world before the virus, thousands of years ago – just think of the dynamic today. Just think of how badly [church leaders](#) want people to join them and of where it will head to next.

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And so we must revisit the beginning – the point of entry itself – because the way people join a church informs the way they conduct themselves among the people of God and even why they think they're there. But, unfortunately, as with the errant shepherds in the days of Ezekiel, God often reserves His harshest words for those who have been put in authority in His house.

Joining a Church Crafted for Comfort

'It takes two to tango', as the old saying goes, and as rampant consumer culture has overtaken the western church at large, church leadership has created its own problem by joining in the moves on the dance floor. Just think of today's most aspirational churches. Visiting families are greeted in the parking lot by beaming cheerleaders wielding "*Welcome Home!*" or "*We're So Glad You Could Make It!*" signs. First-timers are regularly told that the most important thing is feeling at home, while worship leaders often begin the first song by asking how everyone is feeling. Sermons are always relatable, always inspirational, never awkward or difficult to hear. Services are short, sharp and coordinated to give you the best possible time. In fact, it's become popular to now refer to services as '[worship experiences](#)', just in case anyone wasn't yet convinced that their own experience was the main priority. The only barrier to joining the church seems to be one's own desire or lack thereof, and everything seems to be built around feeding that desire.

It should go without saying, but let's say it anyway: the church should be warm, welcoming, friendly, excited, enthusiastic, accommodating, full of love for outsiders, and always ready with a high-five or gentle fist bump. These are all wonderful qualities to show to outsiders; in fact, the Bible instructs us to make the teachings of God attractive (Titus 2:10). But if we're honest, the western church has gone too far. We're meant to make things attractive *by our love*, but today the church tries to entice outsiders with something *that they'll love*.

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A Masterstroke of Compromise

I remember hearing the story of the humble beginnings of an American megachurch. It turns out they decided on a neighbourhood to begin meeting in, canvassed the area door-by-door, and asked residents what they would like to hear a church preaching about. They tallied the topics, and when they began their Sunday meetings, they preached on the most popular ones. Over time the church grew into many thousands, and the approach was hailed as a masterstroke. But giving people exactly what they wanted in order to get them in the door wasn't a masterstroke. It was a recipe for disaster. Decades after their first strategy, that particular church is in real trouble – not in their attendance, but in the worldliness that is rampant among them.

The church in the twenty-first century is profoundly compromised. New ideas are not going to help us. We must go back, back, back to the first century, to the first church. Because the way we think about people joining churches should not be shaped by man's opinions – it should be shaped by the Word of God.

How Was The First Church Built?

The Lord Added to Them

"And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." (Acts 2:47, NIV). So straight off the bat, we have a framework for how people joined the first church: the Lord added them. Why did Luke, the author of Acts, say it like this? Because that was how the disciples would have described it to him. When the disciples looked at those joining their ranks, it was evident that Jesus Himself had done something profound in their hearts, minds and lives. After all, those people joining had to do it on the terms of Jesus and the first disciples, not their own, and then they had to join their lives to them completely.

When someone joins a church, they should submit to the [authority of the leaders](#), fully join hearts with that local family of God, and make it their mission to live out their faith with those people, through good times and bad. Only Jesus can do that in someone's heart and truly add them to a church in a way seen in the New Testament. And people who want to join a local church should ask Him whether He's adding them. This is not just preferable; it's proper. It is not just a good way to join a church; it's God's way.

Many join churches asking, *"Am I happy with the way things are?"* But an equally important question is, *"Is the church happy with the way I am?"*

They Only Did What God Called Them To Do

We're also told, shortly after God's swift judgement of Ananias and Sapphira, that *"no one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people."* (Acts 5:13, NIV). There seemed to be a sense that these people were serious; that there was an untamed power at work among them. Today, the way many join a church is to step back and assess, arms crossed, whether they're happy with the worship, the preaching, the kid's church, the doctrinal stances, the [associations with other churches](#). An objective assessment is important: any believer needs to examine the life and doctrine of their leaders or those who would be their leaders. But, again, we've gone too far. Today the church is the performer on the stage, desperate for applause, a laugh, a good review.

In the church in Acts, you didn't just evaluate the believers, they also scrutinised you in return. Many join churches asking, *"Am I happy with the way things are?"* But an equally important question is, *"Is the church happy with the way I am?"* The first church didn't have to frantically jump through hoops to prove their credentials – they got on with what God was calling them to do. They surely reached out in every way possible, but not from an insecure need to be liked. You get the feeling that making people happy didn't matter to them in the slightest. What mattered was people being born again, dying to themselves, joining the others who had done the same, and then living new lives for Jesus and His family. That's what it looked like to join.

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They Were Family

When someone joins a church, they don't join a meeting, a movement, an event or a club. They join a family. Families deal with things. Families stick together. Families work things out. Families exist because God has put them together, not because they have common interests or enjoy gathering on the same day and during the same time slot. In the early church of Acts, there was one church in a city; you couldn't just leave it and go somewhere else. Like Euodia and Syntyche in Philippians 4:2, you had to work it out. Like the man in 1 Corinthians 5, if you were disciplined out of the church, you had nowhere else to go. You had to come to your senses, repent and be restored to your family.

And so, we must find ways to live like the early church in the way we view our local congregations. Today, you can find multiple churches in a single suburb. There may be many options available to someone if they don't like the church they're part of, but we can still learn to honour the family God has put us in. Yes, God can move us on, and no, it's not necessarily sinful to leave a church. But it's become too easy. And, sadly, people who join churches on their own terms will often leave the same way.

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Joining a Church God's Way

It doesn't have to be this way. The modern church may lose its bearings, but we don't have to. Like Josiah, the child-king who rediscovered God's ways in 1 Kings 22, we can wake from our slumber and do things the way they're meant to be done. If we do this God's way, He will bless it. Many in our generation will continue in their delusion, like the entitled couple in the YouTube video, but we can take the precious Word of God and the uncompromising call of Jesus and do this His way.

If we call people into a local church body the way He did – counting the cost of discipleship, the privilege of family and the glory of serving Jesus together – He'll do the adding.