

# The Need for a Church

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The scriptures clearly teach the origin and need for a church directed by and with the authority of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Many years ago, Elder Mark E. Petersen, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, began a talk with this example:

“Kenneth and his wife, Lucille, are good people, honest and upright. They don’t go to church, though, and they feel they can be good enough without it. They teach their children honesty and virtue and they tell themselves that is about all the Church would do for them.

“And, anyway, they insist that they need their weekends for family recreation ... [and] church-going would really get in their way.”<sup>1</sup>

Today, my message concerns such good and religious-minded people who have stopped attending or participating in their churches.<sup>2</sup> When I say “churches,” I include synagogues, mosques, or other religious organizations. We are concerned that attendance in all of these is down significantly, nationwide.<sup>3</sup> If we cease valuing our churches for any reason, we threaten our personal spiritual life, and significant numbers separating themselves from God reduce His blessings to our nations.

Attendance and activity in a church help us become better people and better influences on the lives of others. In church we are taught how to apply religious principles. We learn from one another. A persuasive example is more powerful than a sermon. We are strengthened by associating with others of like minds. In church attendance and participation, our hearts are, as the Bible says, “knit together in love.”<sup>4</sup>

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The scriptures God has given Christians in the Bible and in modern revelation clearly teach the need for a church. Both show that Jesus Christ organized a church and contemplated that a church would carry on His work after Him. He called Twelve Apostles and gave them authority and keys to direct it. The Bible teaches that Christ is “the head of the church”<sup>5</sup> and that its officers were given “for the

perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.”<sup>6</sup> Surely the Bible is clear on the origin of a church and the need for it now.

Some say that attending church meetings is not helping them. Some say, “I didn’t learn anything today” or “No one was friendly to me” or “I was offended.” Personal disappointments should never keep us from the doctrine of Christ, who taught us to serve, not to be served.<sup>7</sup> With this in mind, another member described the focus of his Church attendance:

“Years ago, I changed my attitude about going to church. No longer do I go to church for my sake, but to think of others. I make a point of saying hello to people who sit alone, to welcome visitors, ... to volunteer for an assignment. ...

“In short, I go to church each week with the intent of being active, not passive, and making a positive difference in people’s lives.”<sup>8</sup>

President Spencer W. Kimball taught that “we do not go to Sabbath meetings to be entertained or even solely to be instructed. We go to worship the Lord. It is an individual responsibility. ... If the service is a failure to you, you have failed. No one can worship for you; you must do your own waiting upon the Lord.”<sup>9</sup>

Church attendance can open our hearts and sanctify our souls.

In a church we don’t just serve alone or by our own choice or at our convenience. We usually serve in a team. In service we find heaven-sent opportunities to rise above the individualism of our age. Church-directed service helps us overcome the personal selfishness that can retard our spiritual growth.

There are other important advantages to mention, even briefly. In church we associate with wonderful people striving to serve God. This reminds us that we are not alone in our religious activities. We all need associations with others, and church associations are some of the best we can experience, for us and our companions and children. Without those associations, especially between children and faithful parents, research shows increasing difficulty for parents to raise children in their faith.<sup>10</sup>

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So far, I have spoken about churches generally. Now I address the special reasons for membership, attendance, and participation in the Savior’s restored Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

We, of course, affirm that the scriptures, ancient and modern, clearly teach the origin and need for a church directed by and with the authority of our Lord, Jesus Christ. We also testify that the restored Church of Jesus Christ has been established to teach the fulness of His doctrine and to officiate with His priesthood authority to perform the ordinances necessary to enter the kingdom of God.<sup>11</sup> Members who forgo Church attendance and rely only on individual spirituality separate themselves from these gospel essentials: the power and blessings of the priesthood,

the fulness of restored doctrine, and the motivations and opportunities to apply that doctrine. They forfeit their opportunity to qualify to perpetuate their family for eternity.

Another great advantage of the restored Church is that it helps us grow spiritually. Growth means change. In spiritual terms this means repenting and seeking to draw nearer to the Lord. In the restored Church we have doctrine, procedures, and inspired helpers that assist us to repent. Their purpose, even in membership councils, is not punishment, like the outcome of a criminal court. Church membership councils lovingly seek to help us qualify for the mercy of forgiveness made possible through the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

Individual spirituality can seldom provide the motivation and structure for unselfish service provided by the restored Church. Great examples of this are the young men and women and seniors who put aside their schooling or retirement activities to accept missionary callings. They work as missionaries to strangers in unfamiliar places they have not chosen. The same is true of faithful members who participate in the unselfish service we call “temple work.” None of such service would be possible without the Church that sponsors it, organizes it, and directs it.

Our members’ religious faith and Church service have taught them how to work in cooperative efforts to benefit the larger community. That kind of experience and development does not happen in the individualism so prevalent in the practices of our current society. In the geographic organization of our local wards, we associate and work with persons we might not otherwise have chosen, persons who teach us and test us.

In addition to helping us learn spiritual qualities like love, compassion, forgiveness, and patience, this gives us the opportunities to learn how to work with persons of very different backgrounds and preferences. This advantage has helped many of our members, and many organizations are blessed by their participation. Latter-day Saints are renowned for their ability to lead and unite in cooperative efforts. That tradition originated with our courageous pioneers who colonized the Intermountain West and established our valued tradition of unselfish cooperation for the common good.

Most humanitarian and charitable efforts need to be accomplished by pooling and managing individual resources on a large scale. The restored Church does this with its enormous humanitarian efforts worldwide. These include distributing educational and medical supplies, feeding the hungry, caring for refugees, helping to reverse the effects of addictions, and a host of others. Our Church members are renowned for their Helping Hands projects in natural disasters. Church membership allows us to be part of such large-scale efforts. Members also pay fast offerings to help the poor in their own midst.

In addition to feeling peace and joy through the companionship of the Spirit, our Church-attending members enjoy the fruits of gospel living, such as the blessings of living the Word of Wisdom and the material and spiritual prosperity promised

for living the law of tithing. We also have the blessing of counsel from inspired leaders.

Crowning all of this are the authoritative priesthood ordinances necessary for eternity, including the sacrament we receive each Sabbath day. The culminating ordinance in the restored Church is the everlasting covenant of marriage, which makes possible the perpetuation of glorious family relationships. President Russell M. Nelson taught this principle in a memorable way. He said: “We cannot *wish* our way into the presence of God. We are to obey the laws upon which [that blessing is] predicated.”<sup>12</sup>

One of those laws is to worship in church each Sabbath day.<sup>13</sup> Our worship and application of eternal principles draw us closer to God and magnify our capacity to love. Parley P. Pratt, one of the original Apostles of this dispensation, described how he felt when the Prophet Joseph Smith explained these principles: “I felt that God was my heavenly Father indeed; that Jesus was my brother, and that the wife of my bosom was an immortal, eternal companion: a kind, ministering angel, given to me as a comfort, and a crown of glory for ever and ever. In short, I could now love with the spirit and with the understanding also.”<sup>14</sup>

In closing, I remind all that we do not believe that good can be accomplished only through a church. Independent of a church, we see millions of people supporting and carrying out innumerable good works. Individually, Latter-day Saints participate in many of them. We see these works as a manifestation of the eternal truth that “the Spirit giveth light to *every man* that cometh into the world.”<sup>15</sup>

Despite the good works that can be accomplished without a church, the fulness of doctrine and its saving and exalting ordinances are available only in the restored Church. In addition, Church attendance gives us the strength and enhancement of faith that comes from associating with other believers and worshipping together with those who are also striving to stay on the covenant path and be better disciples of Christ. I pray that we will all be steadfast in these Church experiences as we seek eternal life, the greatest of all the gifts of God, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

#### Notes

1. 1. Mark E. Petersen, “Eternal Togetherness,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1974, 48.
2. 2. See D. Todd Christofferson, “Why the Church,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Nov. 2015, 108–11.
3. 3. See Jeffrey M. Jones, “U.S. Church Membership Falls below Majority for First Time,” *Gallup*, Mar. 29, 2021, [news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx](https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx).
4. 4. Colossians 2:2.
5. 5. See Ephesians 5:23–24.
6. 6. Ephesians 4:12.

7. 7. See James 1:27.
8. 8. Mark Skousen to Dallin H. Oaks, Feb. 15, 2009.
9. 9. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Spencer W. Kimball* (2006), 173–74.
10. 10. See Elizabeth Weiss Ozotak, “Social and Cognitive Influences on the Development of Religious Beliefs and Commitment in Adolescence,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 28, no. 4 (Dec. 1989), 448–63.
11. 11. See John 3:5.
12. 12. Russell M. Nelson, “Now Is the Time to Prepare,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2005, 18.
13. 13. See Doctrine and Covenants 59:9.
14. 14. *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt*, ed. Parley P. Pratt Jr. (1938), 298.
15. 15. Doctrine and Covenants 84:46; emphasis added; see also Doctrine and Covenants 58:27–28.