

It Is Written

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Does The Bible Teach Public Confession Of Sins?

By Dan Gatlin

Yes! "**Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much**" (James 5:16). The word "confess" means "of a public acknowledgment or confession of sins" (W. E. Vine, p. 227). Vine specifically cites James 5:16 as applying to this definition.

Does this mean that all sins, even private sins, are to be publicly confessed? No. "**If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness**" (1 John 1:8-9). Here, a different word is used, though both are translated "confess." This word means, "to confess by way of admitting oneself guilty of what one is accused of, the result of inward conviction, 1 John 1:9."

What both words have in common is the basic idea of acknowledging our sins. But the difference is in the application. Private sins are confessed to God (1 John 1:9), public sins are confessed publicly (James 5:16). We are not required to take our private sins and announce them publicly. But it would be a violation of James 5:16 if we refused to confess public sins.

We have further instructions, by way of example, of how public sins are to be handled. Acts 8:9-24 speaks of the sin of Simon the sorcerer. He was instructed to "**Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you**" - verse 22.

What many object to is the idea of "coming forward." It is true, the Bible does not specify that a Christian is obligated to "come forward" at a worship service. There are other ways that we can confess public sins. One option is to have a letter read wherein confession is made. Another might be to have another speak for us. All of these are options through which we fulfill the command. "Coming forward" is as good an option as any, but we must remember that it is not the only way of fulfilling the command.

Is Membership In A Local Church Required?

By Dan Gatlin

There are distinctions in how the word "church" is used in the scriptures. Sometimes it is used to refer to local congregations, as in Acts 20:17, 1 Cor. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1. The word "churches" refers to a group of local congregations, Acts 9:31, Gal. 1:2, Rom. 16:16. The word can also refer to all of the saved all over the world without reference to local congregations. For example, "**For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body**" (Eph. 5:23). Some refer to this as the "universal church."

The difficulty that some have with this question rests with a lack of understanding of "necessary implication." Some have argued, "*There is no command telling us to join a local church!*" Direct statements or commands are relatively easy to understand, but necessary implication requires logic and thought. There are several lines of reasoning that imply local church membership.

First, we do not join the "universal church," but the Lord adds us to it when we obey the gospel. Acts 2:47 says, "**And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.**" This verse is not talking about the local congregation. However, we do join a local church: "**And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he**

was a disciple" (Acts 9:26). The word "join" means "to glue or cement together. . ." (Vine). Paul was not simply trying to get into the worship service, rather, he was trying to establish an intimate relationship with the church. At first he was rejected, but later he was accepted. That teaches that the local church has the right to control its membership. Some believe that they are a member wherever they happen to attend. But Acts 9:26 shows otherwise. It clearly shows that there must be agreement between the congregation and the prospective member.

Second, the relationship of elders to the congregation necessarily implies local church membership. The oversight of elders is limited to the congregation where they serve, "**Shepherd the flock of God which is among you**" (1 Pet.5:2). Elders are not "elders at large," but are limited to the local congregation. The flock that they shepherd is "among you." In the same way, members are not "members at large" but their membership is limited to the local congregation. "Among you" does not refer to location, but to relation. We are still under the oversight of our elders even when we are not assembled together. If someone visits another congregation, they are still under the oversight of the elders where their membership is.

"Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you" (Heb. 13:17). If the elders are limited in authority to "the flock of God which is among you" (1 Pet.5:2), then the congregation is to submit to a single group of elders. This *necessarily infers* local church membership.

Third, local church membership is assumed in church discipline. 1 Corinthians 5 deals with a situation where a man is living with his father's wife. Paul writes in verse 2, "**And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you.**" This cannot be carried out if the "member at large" concept is true, but it makes perfect sense if one has the proper view of local church membership.

What if the withdrawn continues to attend? Are they still part of the local church? With the "member at large" concept they would be, since all that is required is attendance. That would render church discipline totally useless. But with the right view of local church membership they may still attend, but would not be counted "among you" (1 Cor.5:2).

To sum up, Paul's example in Acts 9:26 demonstrates that there must be agreement between the individual Christian and the congregation to work together in the cause of Christ. Without this agreement membership does not exist. Part of this agreement is to submit to the authority of the elders in the work of the local church. If a member rebels, the church has the right to withdraw fellowship so that the rebel is no longer a member.