

Verses that contain the word "church"

Verses in which the word is in SINGULAR form

Matthew 16:18	Acts 20:28	1 Corinthians 15:9	1 Thessalonians 1:1
Matthew 18:17	Romans 16:1	1 Corinthians 16:19	2 Thessalonians 1:1
Acts 5:11	Romans 16:5	2 Corinthians 1:1	1 Timothy 3:5
Acts 8:1	Romans 16:23	Galatians 1:13	1 Timothy 3:15
Acts 8:3	1 Corinthians 1:2	Ephesians 1:22	1 Timothy 5:16
Acts 9:31	1 Corinthians 4:17	Ephesians 3:10	1 Timothy 5:17
Acts 11:22	1 Corinthians 6:4	Ephesians 3:21	Philemon 1:2
Acts 11:26	1 Corinthians 10:32	Ephesians 5:23	Hebrews 12:23
Acts 12:1	1 Corinthians 11:18	Ephesians 5:24	James 5:14
Acts 12:5	1 Corinthians 11:22	Ephesians 5:25	3 John 1:6
Acts 13:1	1 Corinthians 12:28	Ephesians 5:27	3 John 1:9
Acts 14:23	1 Corinthians 14:4	Ephesians 5:29	3 John 1:10
Acts 14:27	1 Corinthians 14:5	Ephesians 5:32	Revelation 2:1
Acts 15:3	1 Corinthians 14:12	Philippians 3:6	Revelation 2:8
Acts 15:4	1 Corinthians 14:19	Philippians 4:15	Revelation 2:12
Acts 15:22	1 Corinthians 14:23	Colossians 1:18	Revelation 2:18
Acts 15:30	1 Corinthians 14:26	Colossians 1:24	Revelation 3:1
Acts 18:22	1 Corinthians 14:28	Colossians 4:15	Revelation 3:7
Acts 20:17	1 Corinthians 14:35	Colossians 4:16	Revelation 3:14

Verses in which the word is in PLURAL form

Acts 15:41	2 Corinthians 8:1	Galatians 1:22	Revelation 2:23
Acts 16:5	2 Corinthians 8:18	1 Thessalonians 2:14	Revelation 2:29
Romans 16:4	2 Corinthians 8:19	2 Thessalonians 1:4	Revelation 3:6
Romans 16:16	2 Corinthians 8:23	Revelation 1:4	Revelation 3:13
1 Corinthians 7:17	2 Corinthians 8:24	Revelation 1:11	Revelation 3:22
1 Corinthians 11:16	2 Corinthians 11:8	Revelation 1:20	Revelation 22:16
1 Corinthians 14:34	2 Corinthians 11:28	Revelation 2:7	
1 Corinthians 16:1	2 Corinthians 12:13	Revelation 2:11	
1 Corinthians 16:19	Galatians 1:2	Revelation 2:17	

When we consider the large number verses we have to work with, surely we ought to conclude that they are sufficient for showing us *God's* definition of the word "church"! So if *our* definitions don't agree with what we find in these verses, who is wrong? Us or God? Should we change *our* definitions, or ignore *God's*?

- The definition we choose will communicate an entire concept of "church" - and all that it signifies, whether right or wrong - to those who hear us.

[The following is an attempt to compile all the data listed in the verses that use the word "church." It does not pretend to be fully organized, nor does it claim to be complete in every theological issue. (Many other verses describing the topics mentioned below do not contain the word "church," and attempts were made to limit the use of such verses. You are encouraged to include anything else that you believe might be of importance in developing your concept of the word "church."]

Note (apology): I did not include the verse references in the following compilation, at the time it was originally transferred from a hand-written paper to computer format. By the time I realized the error, the original hand-written information was lost. I do include the list of verses I used (on a separate page), and you are encouraged to examine them on your own, to see if you reach the same conclusions.

What the Bible says about the "Church"

The church is built on a firm foundation called the "rock" (the foundational truth of who Jesus is, as stated by the apostle Peter). It is described as "the pillar and foundation of the truth," as well as "God's household." It was bought by his blood, being purified by Jesus' sacrifice (hence he is called its savior). The church is loved by Jesus Christ, being fed and cared for by him. It is described as being the "body" of Christ, who is its "head." And as such, it submits to him, who is "head over all for the church."

The church is described as being "in" and "of" God (and Christ), "of the Firstborn" and "of the living God."

The church is the recipient of God's grace, and those who belong to it have their names written in heaven. This is all with a purpose: the church is to glorify the God to whom it belongs, and make known his manifold wisdom... even to heavenly beings!

Because of its relationship to the true God, it cannot be overcome and destroyed... even by "the gates of hell." Even so, from the outside, people will sometimes try to destroy it by persecution. Those who belong to it may have to suffer for its sake.

Even from within, false teachers and false followers often rise up. They may try to cause some to stumble... or even try to pervert the way of truth to the point that those who follow the truth are treated as "unbelievers"! They may give it a bad reputation - even giving the world an excuse for despising it! At times, there can be much within the church which would be cause for concern for the true believer. Yet God has provided for the true members of his church, in order that they might deal with this problem.

First, as far as God's people attempting to judge and remove sin from within the church, it is required by the One to whom it belongs. It is not an option... and even the least of the true followers of Christ is qualified (even commanded) to judge and to expose the "pretenders" for what they really are. Yet this is to be done with the proper spirit - in the hope that the person being disciplined will repent of his sin. The person is to be exhorted and repentance is to be encouraged. But as long

as the person refuses to repent, he must be treated as a pagan - one who does not belong to God. As for those outside the church, judging them is not the church's job... at least not in the sense described in this paragraph. (On the other hand, even the mere reading of Scripture is a type of judgment against the unsaved. See 1 Corinthians 14:24-25, for an example of this.)

Second, God has provided the church with everything it needs - both for dealing with the opposition mentioned above, as well as for accomplishing all the wonderful and good things that he desires for the church. He has given it the testimony of Jesus, the letters of the apostles, and the recorded examples of how such men of God (and Jesus himself) lived. This is the message delivered by the Holy Spirit, which those who have "spiritual ears" will "hear." (This refers to the Word of God, which is recognized as the life-changing, living Word, by those who are God's children.) He has laid down rules and practices which are to be followed. (These allow the church to function smoothly, to minimize the encroachment of sin, and to reflect the image of the One who bought it.) He has given us both the teaching and example of the apostles. He has provided the examples of other believers and groups of believers ("churches"), as written in the New Testament, which could be followed or imitated by the generations that would follow.

God has also provided for the church's needs by giving each of its members different gifts and abilities. By these (and if they are working together) they can build up and strengthen the church, living in submission to its "head." (In fact, the human body - many members, each with different functions, all working smoothly together, in submission to the head - is used as an example of how all the parts of the body of Christ are to function together.) The goal of using such gifts is not to exalt oneself, but to build up the church... being a servant to it. (Ultimately, the emphasis is on being a servant to Christ.)

Within the church, the great diversity of gifts are appointed by God himself, given to each person as he (God) sees fit. Each person has gifts... and each gift is important (although some are more visible than others). Each person must be willing to use his gifts and each must be permitted by others to use his gifts. The gifts must be used so as to exalt Christ, not self, and so as to build up the church, which is Christ's body. In all this, the church is to be strengthened and encouraged.

Various principles are mentioned, within the context of worship, which are probably illustrative of the use of gifts in all of life. For example, some gifts have different values, depending on the circumstances. In one instance, the gift of prophecy is described as having a much greater value (in a group setting) than the gift of tongues (which requires the presence of an interpreter, to be of value). Also, each is to be given the opportunity to use his gift. (No one is allowed to push himself to the forefront, and suppress the ability of others to use their gifts.) Yet all must be done in a decent and orderly manner. Finally, there are instances in which restraints are to be placed on the use of gifts (that is, in specific applications of a gift).

Gift (or ability) and function are distinguished. (See 1 Corinthians 12:4-6.) For example, there are instances, in which women are to not use specific gifts (under specific circumstances)... not because God has anything against them, or because they lack the gift, but because of the nature of the role he has given them (Their role is just as important as the man's role, but it is not a carbon copy of it.) God also places certain restrictions on women, because of their historic (not "cultural") relationship to man in the creation and the fall. These historical matters have nothing to do with a woman's worth or value, but are facts of history which influence the way things are - as do many other facts of history. (See Note 1.)

Within the church, God has appointed some as leaders - shepherds or overseers - to direct matters, as necessary. But they are to be servants of Christ, not lords over their subjects. They must be fully devoted to the Lord, and they must fit the qualifications which God has set down for such an office. These qualifications are given as *requirements*, and are not mere suggestions that we can freely ignore. Nor are they to be "updated" with our own set of "specifications.") Leaders have specific functions, as described in Scripture. This includes praying on behalf of others (such as when an individual is sick and needs to confess sin - perhaps being under God's disciplinary judgment.) But they cannot stand as an "intermediary" between the individual and Christ. (It must be remembered that anyone in the church can pray, though perhaps not in the "ceremonial" manner described in the passage in James.) [Many other functions of leaders are mentioned, but not necessarily with the word "church" in the context.]

There are also prophets and teachers within the church. Others have a special gift of hospitality, which can be enjoyed by many within the church. (The context of this verse not only approves the use of the gift, but it implies that it is right for people to enjoy the benefits of other's gifts. Not only is each to do his part, but each is to enjoy the benefits or results of the other gifts being used. We don't have to "feel guilty"!)

As a whole, the church can enjoy another person's use of his gifts (example: hospitality); they can also express gratefulness for those who are willing to exercise those gifts. [Note: There are many other gifts mentioned, which occur in verses which do not contain the word "church,," so they haven't been mentioned here.]

Some gifts (perhaps many) can be shared by all, to some degree. All can share, to one degree or another, in the matter of giving and receiving. (The emphasis in the context of the verse mentioning this fact is on the "giving.") The church can help those who are "truly needy," yet this type of help is to begin at home: each person is commanded to help his own family (and not force an extra burden upon the church, due to their own neglect of their family). As a contrasting principle, there are also times that specific gifts might be legitimately not exercised, such as the instance in which Paul did not "burden" a specific church with a request for financial help. Yet this may be the exception, rather than the rule.

The attitude of the church toward God can have a strong influence on its growth (referring to the true members of the body of Christ, and not to the "pretenders" who claim to be part of it). During the time of the early church, when there was a widespread attitude of fear of the Lord (which results in a fear of sinning), the church experienced a noteworthy amount of growth.

As far as reputation, the church (as well as the individuals which comprise it) should be above reproach. The church's expression of love (first to God, then to others) will be visible, if it exists. (It will not be trying to gain visibility or attention, but such a manifestation of love cannot be hidden forever.) The expression of love and service to others should be praiseworthy (or noteworthy) enough that it could be "boasted about" by others, and used as an example that others could follow. (Remember, that this is not the goal of one's love and service. It may be a consequence, but love to Christ, and exalting him, is the motive.) There are many New Testament examples in which news about one church was reported to another, but it was for the purpose of exalting Christ, not the individuals involved. The individual who is praised for his service to the gospel is serving for (in behalf of) the gospel, rather than for the praise. The praise becomes nothing more than a means of encouraging the individual to continue serving Christ - perhaps even more faithfully. It shows him that his work is not in vain, but is actually of benefit to Christ's body.

The early leaders maintained constant contact with the churches, and it was on a personal level. They were not above the other people, other than their function. They received encouragement from them as much as they gave it. There are recorded instances of the leaders meeting with the church, writing to it (even at times, requesting that churches share their letters with each other). At times, the church was gathered together for the purpose of receiving a report or letter from such individuals. Sometimes specific individuals (rather than the whole group) were addressed by the letters. The book of Revelation has specific messages to seven "angels" (or messengers) which were connected in some way to seven specific churches in Asia.

Men were sometimes chosen by the church to perform specific tasks (such as a mission venture) or to be representatives for some specific function. The apostles and elders were also involved, but there is no evidence that the leadership tried to control who was chosen, other than sometimes choosing leaders for a *new* group of believers (example - Titus 1:5).

The church as a group would, at times, be greeted by others, or send greetings to them. People, such as visiting Christian brothers, would be welcomed and would even be able to enjoy the hospitality of those within the church - unless a false teacher got involved as part of the "welcoming party"! (See 3 John.)

The church "came together as a church" in homes, for times of worship. (They apparently met other places, also, at various times - see Acts 2:46.)

The word "church" (singular) is used of: 1) all Christians who lived in some specific locality, such as in a city (examples: "the church at/in/of..." Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, Cenchrea, Corinth, the Thessalonians, and the seven cities in the book of Revelation), and 2) the totality of all believers - whether referring to all currently alive on the earth, or all the believers down through the ages (including both those who have died, as well as those who are alive). [After all, aren't the "dead" Christians actually alive? They are just at a different location, for the present time!]

The word "churches" (plural) is used in reference to groups of Christians living in different localities or geographical locations (such as: "the churches in/of..." Syria, Cicilia, the Gentiles, Galatia [a province], Macedonia, Judea, the province of Asia; "all the churches," and "the seven churches" located in seven cities, mentioned in the book of Revelation). It is *never* used of different groups living within the same geographical location. [These are called "divisions," rather than "churches," and are *strongly* condemned by God.]

[**Note 1** - Many people today oppose this idea, claiming that these restrictions are nothing more than a *cultural* issue. They claim that the writers (such as Paul) were merely accommodating their message to the prevailing opinions of the day, and that we can ignore what they said, simply because we live in a different culture. Yet Scripture says they are based on *historical* issues, not cultural ones. And even a quick look at Scriptures will show us that the human authors *opposed* the prevailing opinions of the day, any time they failed to agree with God's message. (That is why they were so often opposed - and even killed because of what they said.)]

Study Questions for the concept of "Church"

[Since this is a fairly extensive topic, questions will be limited to the issue at hand. You may add any verses which might be of help. Never forget that the Word of God (all of it - and nothing more) is the final authority.]

Write down the ways the word "church" (or "churches") is normally used today. Compare/contrast each usage of the word with the way(s) it is used in the Bible. (Include the features and characteristics of today's "church," contrasted to the New Testament's concept of "church.") How has the meaning of the word become distorted? What does the Bible say about this?

What is meant by the word "equivocation"? Is equivocating the word "church" a legitimate practice, when we are developing our theological perspectives and applying them to the way we live and interact with other people?

What does the Bible say about "church membership"? Compare this to what is meant when people use the word today. Is there a difference? Why? If there is a difference, does God give anyone authority to ignore (or downplay) what he says about it, and to teach a different viewpoint to people? Do they have a right to force people to accept such a viewpoint before they are willing to consider them "members"?

If you think that people *do* have a right to push a view of "membership" on people, even though it is not God's definition of "membership," then how is doing this different from "adding to or subtracting from" the Word of God, which is so strongly prohibited by Scriptures? (Or is it the same?) Deuteronomy 4:2; 5:32; 12:32; 17:20; 28:14; Joshua 1:7; 23:6; 2 Kings 22:2; 2 Chronicles 34:2; Proverbs 4:27; 30:6; Revelation 22:18-19. How is this different from "lording over" those people you are pushing your views upon? (Or is it the same?) Matthew 20:25, Mark 10:42, Luke 22:25, 2 Corinthians 1:24, 1 Peter 5:3

How does the issue of "authority" fit into the issue of what we believe regarding "church" and "church membership"? When there are conflicting definitions, who or what is our final authority for determining what we will or will not accept and practice? Do we have a right to be arbitrary and pick the view we want - even though it isn't in the Bible - just because others are also doing so?

When false views about something are superimposed upon Scripture, what implications are there regarding one's view regarding "the sufficiency of Scripture"? Is the Bible sufficient *really* for "all matters of faith and practice," if you have to ignore what it says, in favor of a view that it does not teach?

[Many leaders - if you can get them to respond to the issue - will admit what the Bible *does* say; it's just that they aren't willing to practice it. They may claim that what the Bible says is a "theological truth," but will refuse to let that "theological truth" influence the way they live and interact with other followers of Jesus. Nor will they let it influence who they consider "members" of the "church." According to the Bible's definition, to *not*

be a member of the church means you aren't a Christian. Or, if the word is being used in reference to a geographical location, it means you don't live anywhere nearby.]

How does a change in meaning/definition of the word "church" result in a change on one's views? What are the ramifications of such a changed perspective? Does this open us up to the same dangers that Israel had in the Old Testament? (For example, many people in the Old Testament thought they were "God's people" simply because they participated in certain rituals, or they had a name on a list that said they were members of Israel. Does the modern concept of "church" and "membership lists" do a similar thing - allow people to believe they are Christians, because they have their name on a membership list of some "church"?)

Contrast the use of the word "church" (in the sense of "local church") as it is used today, with the way it was used in the New Testament Does the New Testament speak of multiple "churches" within the same locality? The following verses refer to "divisions": Matthew 12:25, Mark 3:24-25, Luke 11:17, Luke 12:51, Romans 16:17, 1 Corinthians 1:10,13; 1 Corinthians 11:18, 1 Corinthians 12:25. (Many other verses exist which do not use the specific word "division." You may include any of them you may find, for answering this question.) Compare what these verses say, with the modern definition of "local church"? What about the verses which talk about "unity"? (There are many such verses.) Do we have the right to claim loyalty to one "division" and not to all? Explain.

Does the modern concept of "church membership" cause us to treat one Christian as different from another? Does it have any implications regarding our use of "gifts" (or the restraint of our use)? Does the Bible allow this?

Many people today use the word "para-church" to describe ministries which are "outside" or "alongside" the church (using their "modern" definition of "church"), which are formed by Christians who have united for the purpose of accomplishing some type of ministry. If we would use the New Testament definition of the word "church," what would the idea of "para-church" convey? Compare\contrast this with the way they use the word today.

COMMENTS ABOUT CHURCH MEMBERSHIP LISTS

Church membership lists are clearly *not* the emphasis of the New Testament. In fact, they are not even mentioned as a consideration - they are most emphatically *not* what New Testament writers looked for as proof of being a part of the church. In fact, nothing could have been farther from their minds, given *their* concept of what the word "church" meant.

Having such a list is not necessarily sinful "in and of itself" (a theoretical scenario which does not actually exist in reality). But is it not necessarily righteous, either. It exists within a context - and that context determines its significance.

Whether or not a group should have a church membership list is *not* the primary issue. It is a secondary issue - a *symptom*, rather than a *cause*. It is a *reflection* of attitudes, rather than their *source*. It reflects one's attitudes about various primary issues - attitudes which have already been presupposed (often unconsciously, sometimes even inconsistently) *prior to* the question of membership lists.

Here are some of the primary issues, for which views are presupposed (to varying degrees) *prior to* the question of membership lists:

1) The nature of the Word of God

What is the nature of the Word of God, and what is the extent of its authority? To what extent should its message control *all* that we think and do? If it is supposed to control *all* that we think and do (as many people *claim* it should), then the issue of "lists" would probably never be seriously considered. After all, such a concept is non-existent in the Word. Worse yet, the way that the concept of "membership lists" is normally used *contradicts* many things that are mentioned in the Word.

2) The limits of human authority

What are the boundaries of the authority that leadership has, within the church? Does an elder - or *anyone* in the church - have the right to impose upon God's people restrictions which God himself does not place upon them? Does anyone have the authority to refuse an individual the full rights (and responsibilities) of being a child of God, just because they do not submit to man-made restrictions? (Perhaps we should ask how *Jesus* would respond to such restrictions - Scripture records his response in several passages. Examples - Matthew 23; Mark 7:1-23.)

Here is an example: Suppose the leadership says: "Only those who are willing to be on our membership list will be permitted to exercise their gifts - and we will refuse to allow those *not* on this list to do so." (They may select only some specific gifts that they refuse to allow the follower of Jesus to use, or they may refuse to allow him to use *any* gift.) This almost blatantly defies what God says about gifts and their usage.

Even in the early church, various groups came up with their own sets of restrictions for "full acceptance" into the body of Christ. The "Judaizers" had their restrictions. (God's response: Acts 15:24 and Galatians 1:8-9, 5:12, 6:12-16, etc.) The "Proto-agnostics" had

theirs... (God's response: Colossians 2:16-23, etc.) In contrast, the apostles didn't have any such set of restrictions. Instead, they opposed those who did!

3) The nature of a "Christian"

What constitutes a Christian? Anyone who is willing can search the Scriptures and find out that the Bible (in other words, God) doesn't use the term "Christian" the way that most people do today. Being a Christian has *nothing* to do with having one's name on a membership list and *everything* to do with following Jesus - specifically learning how to view things the way Jesus defines them and living in a way that reflects (and proves acceptance of) those views. Furthermore, Christianity, from the Bible's perspective (therefore, from God's perspective) is not a "religion"! The only "religion" that God finds acceptable is a *response* of love from someone who has *already* become a follower of Jesus. James 1:26-27 illustrates this love, by giving examples of love for neighbor (helping the helpless) and love for God (a willingness to strive for a morally pure life).

4) The meaning of the word "Church"

What constitutes a church? Even though there will be some followers of Jesus in modern "churches," the modern-day concept is a counterfeit. It is deceptive and misleads many people into thinking they are saved, when they have no other basis than the fact that their name is on a piece of paper called a "membership list"! (Something to think about: When these people perish, who is going to be held accountable for misleading them?)

On the other hand, there are countless numbers of genuine followers of Jesus who are discriminated against, or sometimes even treated like non-Christians, simply because they *don't* have their name on such a list! People who are *not* followers of Jesus, but have their name on a list are treated like Christians, while people who *are* followers of Jesus are treated as non-Christians! (Something to think about: Who is going to be held accountable for treating them this way? And who is going to be held accountable for perpetuating the view of "church" that encouraged such treatment?)

5) Other potential questions include:

What is the nature of Christian ethics? What is the nature of Christian freedom? What is the nature of truth and error? Each of these issues probably deserves an entire paragraph, for the modern concept of "church" violates some aspects of each of them. (Surely *someone* is going to be held accountable for this!)

Today, people often stress things that the New Testament writers *never even thought about!* This emphasis on what the Bible does *not* stress invariably results in a de-emphasis, or negation, of what the Bible *does* stress. Those who are guilty of this would most likely *deny* that they were de-emphasizing what the Bible stresses. But we can expect such a response, because once a person takes his eyes off something that God stresses, he no longer sees it as deserving a primary focus.

Again, we must emphasize the fact that the membership list itself does not lead to all these other issues. The ultimate issue revolves around the person's *attitude* toward the Word - which will determine his perspective on both the list and these other issues. The list is just a symptom of other issues.

Personally, I have never seen *anyone* base such a list on "the Word of God plus nothing." (This is because it *can't* be done.) Nor have I ever been given reasons that could stand up to the test of, "Does the Bible really say that?" THIS IS A SERIOUS MATTER. IF A PERSON CLAIMS THAT THE BIBLE IS THE "FINAL AUTHORITY IN ALL MATTERS OF FAITH AND PRACTICE," THEN SHOULDN'T HE LET THE BIBLE BE THE FINAL AUTHORITY?

The "best" that I have ever heard was a string of arguments based on an equivocation - changing the definitions of the terms (such as the word "church"). For example, people who try to promote this view often re-define the words "church" and "local" in the phrase "local church." Some even go as far as to change the definition of the word "Israel" (in the Old Testament) and re-define it to mean "church" - and then they develop a series of extrapolations from Old Testament passages, using those "new" definitions! But if we keep changing definitions of words found in the Bible (and I have never seen a person limit his re-defining to *only* the issue of church membership), why should we keep calling ourselves "Christianity"? Why shouldn't we be willing to acknowledge the *distinction* between ourselves (and our "re-defined Bible") and the original Christianity which used the definitions of the words as they exist in the original writings?

Others will invent what they claim to be "logical deductions" to "prove" their concepts of "church" and "membership lists." Some, for instance, take the fact that the apostles knew there were about 3000 people saved (Acts 2:41) as "proof" that they kept a list! This is as foolish as claiming that the reference to Jesus feeding 5000 men (plus woman and children added above that number) "proves" that they all had to put their name on a "food roster" before Jesus let them eat! (Did he also put them on a mailing list, so they could receive "junk mail" from him? Just think... if he got their e-mail addresses, he could "feed" them with "spam" the rest of their lives!)

I do not say that there is *never* a reason to have some type of membership list. Sometimes it may be even mandatory, such as when the government forces a group to do it - assuming the people choose to obey the government regulation. (This issue often comes up in countries that are hostile to the good news about Jesus.) But such a list - if it existed - would be merely to appease the government. It would in no way place restrictions on the *true* followers of Christ - who might even leave (and meet on their own) if it did. Nor would it have any impact on the functioning of the church - the *true* church - or the rights and responsibilities of the individuals.

Placing an *emphasis* on a membership list is a different matter. I have never known an instance in which people who stressed "church membership" haven't sooner or later raised it above at least some of the primary commands of the Bible. And I have *never* known a time a time when a secondary issue was elevated to the level of a primary issue, that sin wasn't the eventual outcome. It is impossible to do this - to place greater emphasis on secondary issues - without sinning, for God gives greater priority to the *primary* issues.

In such a situation, the primary and the secondary will *always* come into conflict at one point or another. This is because the teachings of Scripture are interrelated, so when a person "redefines" an issue, so as to exalt a secondary issue (such as "church membership) above primary issues, it influences one's perspective on other issues. Having "redefined" some parts of their thinking, to accommodate such teachings, it often results in a spontaneous re-definition of other areas. In the end, the person may be guilty of sin and distorting God's Word without even knowing it.

There was a time - in the New Testament church - that people received the full rights and privileges of being members of the Body of Christ after they had simply 1) repented, been 2) baptized (which normally represented the first act of obedience to Christ, and was done in public... rather than months or years later, behind the closed doors of a building), and after they had 3) begun to show the truthfulness of their claims by their lifestyle (Acts 26:20, etc.). Today, however, people have decided that these things are not enough (and in some cases, they claim some of these things are not even *necessary*). And they have added additional rules and regulations. They have exalted unimportant matters over the primary issues and obligations that are most important to God. They have even declared people "church members" when the fruit of salvation was absent from their lives! In other words, they are acting the same as the religious leaders of Jesus' day - leaders who were held in high regard by the people, and who were considered the supreme example of spirituality. According to Jesus, however, they were spiritually "bankrupt."

The Christianity of the Bible claims that salvation includes a radical change in one's thoughts and actions - and this impacts every aspect of his life. It means a change in perspective in all that one does, a change in view regarding the very nature of issues that people stress, a change in what one emphasizes. Even the very basic issue of how to think is influenced, and must be influenced by the Word of God... in all ways.

The idea of "church membership lists," so strongly emphasized in many of today's "churches," is such a secondary issue (at best), as far as the Bible's "Christianity" is concerned, that it almost represents a waste of time... time that could be better used attempting to recover some of the primary issues that have been so long neglected - even lost - by the modern "church."

It may be too late. It may be the time that Jesus has to spit (vomit) the modern "church" out of his mouth (as in Revelation 3:16). But perhaps we shouldn't give up hope, yet. Perhaps - just perhaps - if only perspectives on things such as these were radically changed; if "arguments and pretensions" were demolished and everything were brought back into conformity to the Word of God, as written; *and if we would only learn to "not go beyond what is written"...* then perhaps a new reformation would take place, and God would return to us and bless us - *not* superficially, as happens in many "churches" today, but with a depth that has not occurred for many years.