

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

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Church membership—an idea rejected by some, practically worshipped by others. Many Christians feel proud because their name is on the roll of a church while others feel especially spiritual because they understand that they do not “have” to belong to a church to gain entrance to Heaven.

Which is the correct stand to take on this issue? The only way to make an informed decision is to...well, become informed. What does the Bible say about this matter? Are there any practical reasons to support or reject church membership? Its opponents will readily point out that there are no specific commands in the Bible to become a member of a local church.

It must first be understood that the word “church” in the New Testament is translated from the Greek word *ekklesia*, which means “called out.” Therefore, the biblical writers understood that the church is a group of people who were “called out” from another group. It is obvious throughout the New Testament that the world is the organization from which this group was called out.

Many, especially those who do not agree with the concept of church membership, speak of a “universal church” which does in fact exist. The universal church is not a mystical concept. Rather, it consists of real people all over the world who have put their faith in Jesus Christ. However, even a casual reading through the New Testament makes it clear that great emphasis is placed on local churches. These local churches met in specific cities and were ruled by specific officers.

WHY HAVE CHURCH MEMBERSHIP?

The example of the New Testament Church

Let’s look at a bit of history to help answer the question of church membership. First, the New Testament church provides a worthy example. Though there is no indication of how the New Testament church kept track of people, it is clear that there were some who were specifically “in” the church and others who were not. The book of Acts is, of course, the place to go to study the origins of the church. In Acts 2:40-47, after Peter’s sermon, about three thousand people were added to the church. After that new members were being added daily. Clear distinction existed between those who were in the church and those who were not.

Moving forward to Acts 6, the Apostles had a problem. The Hellenistic (Greek-speaking Jews) widows were being overlooked in

the daily care of the church. Some men (most likely the early deacons) were chosen to oversee this process. How did they know which widows to include in their care? There must have been some way to distinguish those in the church from those on the outside.

Speaking of these early deacons, consider how they were chosen. Surely not just anyone from town could be considered. A specific pool of candidates had to be available. Not only that, but who was allowed to do the choosing? The Apostles had delegated this job to the “multitude of the disciples.” Again, there had to be specific limitations on who would be included in this group.

Another indication of local church membership is Paul’s confrontation with sin in the church. In I Corinthians 5:13, he urges the church at Corinth to “put away from yourselves that wicked person.” If there was no specific church membership, from what would this erring brother be “put away?”

Paul’s letters themselves indicate the importance of local congregations of Christians. He wrote to the churches at Corinth, Philippi, Colossae, etc. These were specific churches in specific places. John, while passing on the visions given to him, wrote to seven specific local churches (Revelation 2-3).

Further proof of the organization of local churches in the New Testament can be found in the fact that certain offices were to be filled. I Timothy 3 gives specific qualifications for the positions of pastor (bishop) and deacon.

The history of the early church

During the centuries that followed the New Testament church, much emphasis was placed on membership. Unfortunately, membership in the church eventually came to be seen as necessary for salvation, which led to infant baptism and corruption of the clergy.

Infant baptism was commenced because it began to be taught that church membership was necessary for salvation. The fear was that a child may die soon after birth, thereby without hope of salvation. Therefore, baptism as soon as possible began to be practiced.

Corruption of the clergy came about because of the incredible power the church was seen to have over salvation. A pope was able to excommunicate an individual or put a whole locality under an interdict, which would effectually close the churches. Because salvation was seen as coming through the church, the ones being excommunicated were considered as having been banned to Hell. It does not require much imagination to see the corruption available through this kind of absolute power.

Though infant baptism and clerical power over salvation are obviously based from false teaching, the point is that the early church did carry on the emphasis of membership that was prevalent in the New Testament church. In effect, the Catholic church turned things

around backwards – instead of salvation necessary for church membership, they made church membership necessary for salvation.

WHY BECOME A MEMBER?

Purity of doctrine

As can be seen from the paragraphs above, false doctrine is easily propagated in a church setting. Church membership is one way to keep this to a minimum. No one should be allowed into membership who has not expressed agreement with the doctrine and practices held by that particular church.

Identification

Once upon a time, albeit a short time, there was only one local church, which met in Jerusalem. Most likely every person who believed in Jesus Christ was affiliated with this little group, which could fit in one room on the Day of Pentecost. Over the next few months and years, this group grew exponentially until it was spread all over the known world. In each city where believers were located, a bishop (pastor) was set apart to lead that specific congregation. As the body of Christ began to grow, other church groups would be started in the same town, with the result that there would be multiple bishops. One of these bishops would then be promoted to a higher position, putting him in authority over all of the churches in the area. Eventually a greater distinction was placed between these positions, as the local leaders were labeled as priests, and their overseers carried the title of bishop. Later, a metropolitan bishop would be exalted over the other bishops in an area. Ultimately this arrangement led to the formation of the Roman Catholic Church, with its final authority rested in the bishop of Rome, also known as the Pope.

Thus was the organizational structure of the mainline, universal (catholic) church. The goal was to keep all “Christians” in the same “church.” The problem with this was that local congregations had no control over the inevitable variations in doctrine that began to appear in the Catholic Church.

As the Catholic Church began to grow in numbers, there were some on the outside who, while believers in Jesus Christ, did not accept the teaching or practices of the mainstream church. This became most notable in the sixteenth century in the Protestant Reformation, when many Christians became tired of the corruption in the Roman Catholic Church.

It is unfortunate that many people today are afraid of aligning themselves with a certain church. The thought that “it doesn’t matter where I worship” was foreign to many who lived at the time of the Reformation. A good number of real believers gave their lives over their

decision of how they would worship God.

In today's America, there is very little persecution over one's choice of church. However, that does not make it any less important. Back in Jerusalem at Pentecost, a person was either "in" the church or "out" of it. Today, the lines are not quite that clear. Just claiming to be a believer in Jesus Christ does not set one apart as much as his choice of how and where to worship.

When a person joins a church, he affiliates himself with its beliefs and differentiates himself from the beliefs of others. He is making a stand on what he believes, just as the Reformers did. No one should expect to become a teacher or a leader in a church when he is not committed to upholding the doctrine promoted in it. It would be foolish for a church to allow this to be so.

Relying on denominational affiliation rather than local church affiliation can also be dangerous. Even many Baptists involve themselves heavily in groups such as the Southern Baptists, GARBC, American Baptist, etc. However, one would be hard pressed to find such an organization in the Bible. It is not that these organizations are evil, as they are not. In fact, they can often pool their resources and do much good. The issue is that the Bible does not refer to denomination groups but rather to local congregations. The church *at* Philippi is addressed, Paul wrote to the church *at* Corinth, etc.

Privileges

Belonging to a local church also has some personal benefits. Friendships develop among church members, which leads to care for each other. When someone is sick, it is noticed. When someone has a need, another is available to help. When church attendance falters because of spiritual issues (which is usually the case), someone notices. Church-hoppers don't have this kind of help and accountability.

Commitment

When a person becomes a member of a church, he is in effect committing himself to that particular body. It is like a marriage. He now has someone to whom he is responsible. This commitment will keep a Christian more faithful, and commitment is high on God's list of qualifications for His servants.

And another also said, Lord, I will follow thee; but let me first go bid them farewell, which are at home at my house. And Jesus said unto him, No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God. (Luke 9:61-62)

God requires commitment out of those who would be used by Him. He cannot use someone who is not sure they will continue in the

work. Church membership is a commitment, a sign that one is willing to put his hand to the plow and keep it there until the furrow is plowed.

Discipline

Paul repeatedly was forced to deal with problems in the church at Corinth. At one point the situation became so intense that he recommended severe discipline of a church member. Though the word “excommunication” is not used, that is basically what was to be done. Having no distinct lines between members and non-members could contribute to confusion about exactly how to carry out this process.

Jesus also alluded to excommunication in His words recorded in Matthew 18:15-17.

Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.

If there is no official roll of church membership, how does one know exactly who fits into the “church?” Should the news be spread around town for anyone who may want to consider himself part of the church as a means to obtain a bit of juicy gossip? The indication seems to be that there is a specific body of believers with clear boundaries.

Submission

Finally, the commands of submission to those in ecclesiastical authority point toward a unambiguous body of believers. In I Timothy 3, Paul refers to the office of the bishop, which means “overseer.” God has placed pastors in authority over the local church. However, He has not placed them in authority over the secular world. From history it can be learned that close ties between the church and the state lead to incredible corruption. Once again, clear lines must be drawn to delineate church membership from the secular world.

THE REQUIREMENTS FOR CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Now that it has been established that membership in a local church has both a biblical example and great benefits, the next question that must be addressed is what is required to be a member. The answer is found in Acts 2. In verse 41, we read “they that gladly received his

word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.” A few verses later, in verse 47, we are told that “the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.” So, in these two verses we have the requirements for church membership.

Salvation

Obviously, no church would want a membership made up of unregenerate persons. The universal church (all believers) is made up, of course, only of believers. Therefore, the local churches must do the same.

Baptism

Almost every time in the New Testament that someone puts his faith in Jesus Christ, he is immediately baptized. Therefore, it is clear that baptism is the first step of obedience after salvation.

The Bible makes it very clear that salvation comes through faith in Jesus Christ alone. Baptism does not play a part in salvation, but rather follows it. Why is it so important? It is designed to be a symbol of three very important truths. First, it is a symbol of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Second, it shows that the one being baptized has died to himself, and has risen as a new man to live a life solely for the pleasure of Jesus Christ. Third, baptism symbolizes that the one being baptized is identifying himself with Jesus Christ. The potency of this third point is not as readily understood today as it was over the course of the past two thousand years. Many people in the early church as well as after the Reformation understood that baptism would set them apart from the mainstream, which would most likely result in persecution or death.

Agreement

As mentioned above, one of the reasons for the existence of church membership is identification. Therefore, it is imperative that the members are united by agreement over a certain set of basic doctrines. In Amos 3:3, the rhetorical question is asked, “Can two walk together, except they be agreed?” The obvious answer is that they cannot. Therefore, those who would desire membership in a church must be required to express agreement with its doctrinal statement.

THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

If you were to go into most churches and compare the attendance with the membership roster, you would discover a very disheartening truth. Not every Christian wants to take part in the church where he is a member. Many have not darkened the door of their

church for years, but when told that their name is going to be removed from the membership, they go ballistic. Why is this? Most likely many do not realize that being a member of a church is not just a privilege. There is also a great amount of responsibility involved.

Faithfulness

And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.

Hebrews 10:24-25

Why is it that so many Christians only meet together when it is convenient? Many would not dare miss a Little League game or a wrestling match, but when it comes to meeting with other blood-bought believers in Jesus Christ, there just is not enough time. It's not that it's a sin to attend a special event every once in a while on Sundays. The issue is that some have a chronic problem of forsaking the assembling together every time something "more important" comes up. Conviction is desperately needed in our churches. Not conviction about church attendance, but rather about priorities.

Most of us thoroughly enjoy eating. After all, who does not enjoy a good steak or a cheesy pizza? Much human fellowship is centered around food. So, when a person loses a desire to eat, no one rebukes them and fusses at them to start eating again. Rather, they become concerned and try to find out what is wrong. Is there a sickness? An eating disorder? When a person loses the desire to eat, the problem is not that life is too busy or that the food is not good. Plain and simple, there is a problem somewhere that needs to be addressed. When the underlying problem is fixed, the desire to eat will return.

Church attendance is much like eating. It is a privilege. If you do not believe that, try talking to someone who has been forced to meet in an underground church. Read about those who have given their lives for their beliefs. Like eating, church attendance is a privilege that is necessary for sustenance of health. The real issue is not that you do not attend church, but why you do not. Your preacher puts together messages for every service, and each one of them contributes to a different aspect of your spiritual health. If you neglect to show up, you are going to become spiritually malnourished.

Involvement

True faithfulness goes beyond showing up for church services. A member has an obligation to also be involved in the work of the church. It is commonly reported that 20% of the people do 80% of the work in a church. *Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular* (1 Corinthians 12:27). A church is a body— not a bunch of separate individuals running around. When one member of a body

suffers, all the members suffer right along with it. So, why is it that in the body of Christ, so many are content with sitting around like dead weight while letting others do all the work? If you are a member of a church, you have a job to fulfill. Find out what you can do, and do it!

There is a common misconception in churches that there are “my ministries” and “your ministries.” However, in a local church, all ministries belong to the whole body. Granted, every member cannot take part in every ministry opportunity, but often divisions arise because of conflicts between these ministries. When you are part of a church, you are a part of everything that takes place within it. The lives of church members should be interconnected. After all, we are “called out” of the world and “called into” this body. *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord* (Colossians 3:16).

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