

THE CHRISTIAN & THE CHURCH (17)

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The Fact Of Church Membership.

Last Lord's Day we began to look at the fact of church membership. We saw in the word of God that the church of our Lord Jesus Christ is pictured as a universal body of believers. But more importantly, it is pictured as consisting of individual local churches to be found in cities, towns and villages. Each local church has an identifiable membership with its own pastors and deacons. The first church that was established was the church in Jerusalem. From this church, churches were established in Judea, Galilee, Samaria and finally in Antioch. From Antioch Paul and Barnabas were sent out as missionaries and they established churches in every city they visited and preached.

I made it clear that there is no command in God's word that says, "Thou shalt join a church." But the fact is, as **Stott** noted, "*True conversion always issues in church membership.*" I want to summarize the strands of truth we saw that point in the direction that every Christian must be a member of an established Biblical church.

Firstly, the first established church, the church in Jerusalem had an identifiable membership. They had **120** members. (*Acts 1:15*). And after Peter's sermon in *Acts 2*, **3000** people were saved, baptized and added to the church. They were not baptized and then left to fend for themselves. What is clear here at the very beginning is that baptism leads to membership in the local church body. The **3000** were added to the existing body of believers and brought into the ongoing activities of the body. *Acts 2:42* says "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."

Secondly, the church in Antioch had an identifiable membership and leadership. One day, during a period of prayer and fasting, the Holy Spirit directed the leaders of the church to appoint and send out missionaries. (*Acts 13:1-3*). The men chosen to be the missionaries were Paul and Barnabas. When both men completed their missionary labors and returned home, they gave a report to the church that sent them out as missionaries. Turn to *Acts 14:26-27*. (**read**). We must note here the following : Paul and Barnabas were members of the church in Antioch. They were under the authority of the church in Antioch. They were sent out as missionaries by the church in Antioch. And when they returned home they reported to the church in Antioch.

Thirdly, in their missionary journey Paul and Barnabas did not establish churches that were little outposts of the church in Antioch. They did not establish churches that were placed under the established authority and oversight of the church in Antioch. The leaders in the church at Antioch had no such universal authority. Paul and Barnabas established independent local churches with their own identifiable memberships and pastors. (*Acts 14:21-23*).

Fourthly, pastors are not to lord it over those members “allotted to [their] charge.” (*1Pet.5:3*). “Allotted to [their] charge” means that pastors know the members of their church. They can identify the members of their church. When members of other churches call me for some kind of help, I would normally ask them, “*Are you a member of a church?*” Once they say “**yes**”, my next question is, “*Have you spoken to your pastor?*” Generally the answer is “**No**”. And then my answer is, “*you need to talk to your pastor.*” My answer results in other responses or explanations why they had to call me. One of the most popular is, “*My pastor cannot be reached because he has refused to give us his phone number.*” I then turn them to a couple passages and ask them, “*Why are you a member of such a church?*”

Pastors have a definite responsibility for the members placed under their care. This responsibility means that the members under a pastor’s care **must** have access to their pastor **24/7**. The shepherding responsibility a pastor has for his members forbids him

from making himself totally inaccessible to his members. An inaccessible pastor is a contradiction. The shepherding responsibility a pastor has for his members forbids him from lording it over his members. A domineering pastor is a contradiction.

In the last FIRE conference we heard the very sad story about a pastor who was totally inaccessible after his established working hours. A young man was killed in an accident. His parents were members of that church. After many attempts the pastor could not be contacted and a pastor from another church had to step in and minister to these two devastated parents.

Fifthly, pastors must care for, give oversight to and guard the members allotted to their charge. The members of the church are constantly in danger. The forces of darkness are constantly arrayed against them and waging war upon them. One of their most dangerous enemies is the sin that indwells them. Another dangerous enemy is smooth talking flatterers. They disguise themselves as angels of light and as servants of righteousness. But they are savage wolves wearing sheep's clothing. (*2Cor.11:13-15; Matt.7:15; Acts 20:29-30*).

It is for this reason *Heb.13:17* says to you, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account." Note the identifying emphasis : your leaders; your souls. One of the important tasks your pastors have is to "keep watch over your souls." The verb used means time must be of no consequence in the carrying out of this task of caring for Christ's sheep.

When we see a specific danger coming against you, we focus our prayers on you. And we warn you. We cannot compel you to listen to us. When you get in trouble because you did not listen, then we must be ready to patiently deal with you and help you pick up the pieces. We are not miracle-workers and so, in helping you, we may not be able to put "*Humpty-Dumpty back together again*". The compulsion you are given for obeying your pastors is a divine compulsion. It is a part of God's wise dealings with you. When you do not listen and sin we may have to take disciplinary measures against you.

But at the same time you will have to answer to God for your sin of failing to listen to your pastors and for the sin you fell into.

I want to set before you now the other strands of truth found in God's word that support the fact that there must be established identifiable memberships in local churches. The **sixth** point is the fact of church discipline. In *Matt.18:15-20* Jesus set before us a general pattern for dealing with members who have fallen into sin. The pattern begins with your private dealings with one who has sinned. Jesus said "If your brother sins." As we shall see shortly, this person is not only "**your brother**", he is also a member of the church in which you are a member.

The assumption is that you have primary knowledge that this brother (or sister) has sinned. Your responsibility is not to say, "*that's none of my business.*" The Lord Jesus is saying that it is your business. Your responsibility is not to tell the pastors. Your responsibility is not to tell others. That's gossiping. Your responsibility is loving confrontation and seeking to restore this person through repentance and correction. (cf. *Gal.6:1*).

Now, if you follow all the steps in the process and fail, then your last resort is to tell the church what has happened. And then the church must take action. Now note what Jesus said, "tell it to the church." What church? The universal church? How will the universal church take action here? We can also ask : Who in the universal church will take action? The idea is tell it to the local church of which both of you are identifiable members and let the identifiable leaders of that church take action. If this member refuses to listen to the church and repent, then he is excommunicated. Again, the question must be asked, excommunicated from what? He is excommunicated from the local church of which he is a member. A church cannot discipline or excommunicate you unless you are an identifiable member in that church.

The disciplinary action described in *1Cor.5* is rooted in church membership. The man who sinned and was excommunicated was a member of the church in Corinth. Paul

commanded the church in Corinth to take action against this man. Now note, the initial failure of the church in Corinth to take action did not mean that Paul could now call upon the church in Ephesus to take action. This man was not a member in the church at Ephesus. He was a member in the church at Corinth. And the church at Corinth must be held responsible to take action. And if they refused to take action, then no other church could take action against the man. Later on, when the man repented, the church in Corinth was called upon to restore him. (cf. *2Cor.2:6-8*).

Church discipline is both corrective and protective. A professed Christian who is not a church member cannot be corrected and restored when he sins. A professed Christian who is not corrected and restored when he sins is left wide open to apostasy. This person has no visible protection against apostasy because he has no pastor who is under the command of the Chief Shepherd to watch over his soul and protect him. This person has no pastor who is responsible to pray for him.

Let me ask you : if you are not a church member, is this how you want to live? Do you want to live without pastoral prayer? Do you want to live without a pastor watching over your soul? Do you want to live without having pastors and brethren in Christ to correct you and restore you when you sin? Is your selfishness so great that you would rather choose to travel on the road that leads to apostasy than travel on the road in which you are in the company of the saints?

The **seventh** point that sets before us the fact of church membership is found in *1Cor.12*. We studied this chapter in some detail for several weeks in this series of sermons. In this chapter Paul compared the church to the human body and described the church as the body of Christ. This metaphor of the body is a strong argument for becoming an identifiable member of a local Biblical church.

There is something that is unnatural and contradictory in a person claiming to be a Christian and a member of Christ's universal body and yet refusing to become an identifiable and functional member of a Biblical local church body. There are a lot of

people out there who are claiming to be Christians and a part of Christ's universal church but who are detached from the local church. If they are truly saved, it is like having a hand living and functioning detached from the body. To say the least, the picture is grotesque. The metaphor of the vine and branches in *Jn.15:1-11* says you cannot survive detached from the vine. Those branches that are detached from the vine will dry up and face the fire.

The **eighth** point that sets before us the fact of church membership is the members' responsibilities for their pastors. Please turn to *1Thess.5:12-13*. Paul wrote, "But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work." This command cannot be obeyed unless you have an identifiable membership with identifiable pastors.

Note Paul's verbs : diligently labor; have charge over; give instruction (or counsel). They are all in the present tense which means your pastors are continually doing these things. The object of their actions is "**you**". Note also that your pastors are described as "among you" and "over you". You have a God-given responsibility for your pastors who are among you and over you and whose lives are marked by those three verbs. Your responsibility is to appreciate them. Your responsibility is to esteem them very highly in love. *1Cor.9:11, 14; Gal.6:6; 1Tim.5:17-18* clearly teach that you are also responsible to pay a salary to your pastors for their labors.

Church membership is a very serious issue and be very careful about treating it lightly, dismissing it or flat out rejecting it. You will be endangering your soul. The church is not perfect. The church is pictured as a family. In every family there is conflict. God has required that with gentleness, patience and love we resolve our conflicts and live together in unity and harmony and peace. (*Gal.6:1; 2Tim.2:24-26; Eph.4:3; 1Thess.5:14*).

There are Biblical reasons for leaving one church and joining another. The two primary reasons are doctrinal heresies and ongoing pastoral failures. But if you leave because you refuse to resolve your conflicts with other members in the church, you will move again and again and again. You will never find a church that does everything the way you want it. You will never find a church that is free from interpersonal offenses and conflicts. If you cannot learn to live with the proper understanding and practice of the principle, “Love covers a multitude of sins” (*1Pet.4:8*), you will not be able to settle down in a church. And if you finally settle down because you have run out of options, you will become a member who is a spectator.

People have many priorities today for choosing a church. Generally they are unbiblical priorities. The Bible gives you three very important priorities that you must have : **(1)**. Faithful pastors who actively care for your souls. **(2)**. Faithful teaching of the word of God. **(3)**. The existence of true fellowship among the members of the church. Note I said “**true fellowship**” and not “**perfect fellowship**”.

We have seen that the church plays a vitally important role in your salvation. The church also plays a vitally important role in your ongoing sanctification. Sanctification has to do with your growth in holiness, your growth in knowing Christ, your growth in being conformed to Christ, your ongoing transformation from what you were in this world as a sinner to what you ought to become as a saint in Christ. (*2Pet.3:18; Rom.12:1-2; 2Cor.7:1*). You need the church to accomplish this sanctification in Christ.

Your ongoing sanctification in Christ cannot take place apart from the word of God. (*Jn.17:17*). You need the pastors and teachers in the church to teach you God’s word and make you rich in your knowledge of God’s word. (*Eph.4:11-12; Col.3:16*). Ongoing sanctification means you also need pastors to pray for you, to watch over your souls, to discipline you, to restore you, to correct you, to exhort you, to counsel you, to give you God’s comfort in times of crisis and to love you unconditionally as Christ loves you. (*Heb.13:17; Gal.6:1-2; 2Cor.1:3-7*). You also need the members of the church to do for you at the fellowship level what the pastors are doing at the leadership level.

Please turn to *Eph.3:17-19* and let us take careful note of Paul's prayer. "So that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend ... what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, and that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God." Did the Holy Spirit say through Paul what I just read? No! Yet there are so many people who read it as I just did and live it in the same manner.

Paul wants every individual Christian to comprehend the breadth, length, height and depth of Christ's love and to experientially know that love. But he is also making it clear that this cannot be achieved apart from all the saints. This can only be achieved "together with all the saints". The Bible continually maintains your individual integrity but at the same time it also continually attacks the sin of individualism. The rejection of church membership is the embrace of the sin of individualism. To use Paul's language, you are that eye that says to the hand, "I have no need of you." You are that foot saying to the ear, "I have no need of you." (cf. *1Cor.12:21*).

I close this point on church membership by turning your attention to *Jn.13:34-35*. Jesus said, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." The possibility of you obeying this very foundational command given to us by our Lord is very remote if you are not a bona fide member of a local Biblical church and involved in the lives of these members. If you are not manifesting Christ's love to Christ's people on an ongoing basis, what right do you have to call yourself a Christian? Regardless of what a person may claim, if that person refuses to become a church member and / or get involved on the terms and conditions the Lord has set out, that person's claim to be a Christian will remain Biblically suspect.

A person does not become a Christian on his own terms and conditions. A person becomes a Christian based upon Christ's terms and conditions. And that person serves

Christ faithfully on Christ's terms and conditions. Christ's terms and conditions for salvation, sanctification and service are not negotiable. They are non-negotiable and unchanging. Far too many people today are Christians on their terms and conditions. They are church members on their terms and conditions. And they serve Christ on their terms and conditions.

On that final day these people will come face to face with ***Matt.7:21-23***. (**read**). When your terms and conditions are not the Father's will, they are lawlessness. And those who live Biblically defined lawless lives, that is, rejecting the Father's will, will hear these ominous words, "I never knew you; depart from Me." Jesus' point in these verses is that a lot of very highly religious people are living lawless lives because they are living their religious lives on their terms and conditions and not based on the Father's will.

Loving The Church.

The final point I want to deal with in this series is : **Loving the church**. Do you love the church? If you love the church, why do you love the church? If you do not love the church, why is it that you do not love the church? **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** was brutally martyred for his faith by Hitler one month before the end of World War 2. Regarding the church **Bonhoeffer** said the word "**church**" *"to Protestants has the sound of something infinitely commonplace, more or less indifferent and superfluous, that does not make their heart beat faster; something with which a sense of boredom is so often associated."*

Three decades later **Michael Griffiths** wrote, *"A high proportion of people who "go to church" have forgotten what it is all for. Week by week they attend services in a special building and go through their particular, time-honored routine, but give little thought to the purpose of what they are doing. The Bible talks about the "bride of Christ" but the church today seems like a ragged Cinderella. It needs*

to reaffirm the non-negotiable, essential elements that God designed for it to be committed to.”

Just over a year ago **Pastor John MacArthur** wrote, *“Let’s be honest : there is too much truth in those criticisms to dismiss them lightly. Evangelicals are far too prone to indifference about the church. Some evangelicals live on the periphery of the church, attending and observing without ever really becoming an integral part of the body. Many who profess faith in Christ remain totally impassive about the church.”*

Today, in the time that remains I want to introduce us to this subject by looking at the attitude of the saints in the Old Testament. In the O.T. the temple was in Jerusalem or Zion. The temple was the place of God’s special presence among the Jews. In time Jerusalem or Zion became the alter ego for the temple. Before the temple was built the sanctuary of God was the tabernacle. To begin, let us look at the following verses.

Psa.132:13-14, “For the Lord has chosen Zion; He has desired it for His habitation. This is My resting place forever, Here I will dwell, for I have desired it.”

Psa.87:2-3, “The Lord loves the gates of Zion more than all the other dwelling places of Jacob. Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God.”

Psa.48:1-2, “Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, In the city of our God, His holy mountain. Beautiful is elevation, the joy of the whole earth, Is Mount Zion in the far north, The city of the great King.”

Psa.50:2, “Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God has shone forth.”

Psa.129:5, “May all who hate Zion be put to shame and turned back.”

“The Lord has chosen Zion” speaks of His electing love for Zion. His desire is for Zion. Zion will be His resting or dwelling place forever. With the Jewish temple destroyed, where is the fulfillment of this promise that Zion will be God’s dwelling place forever? The fulfillment, as we shall see, is the church. Next, we must note that it is specifically stated that the Lord loves Zion.

VanGemerén wrote, *“The Lord has founded Zion by setting His electing love on her. The special quality of Jerusalem did not reside in her natural holiness but in the love of God. The use of the participle “love” bears out the constancy of His love for Zion.... The electing love of God for Zion magnifies the uniqueness of the temple in Jerusalem over any other sacred places”* in Israel designated as “the other dwelling places of Jacob.”

In *Psa.87:3* the psalmist glorifies Zion. He does not speak disparagingly of Zion. He has no contempt for Zion. Why? The psalmist loves the Lord. And the Lord loves Zion. The psalmist must love what the Lord loves. The verb **“spoken”** can be also translated **“sung”**. And so a proper translation will also be : “Glorious things are sung of you, O city of God.”

In *Psa.48:1-2* we find the psalmist glorying again in Zion. Why is Zion described as “beautiful” and “the joy of the whole earth”? The beauty and joy are not inherent in Mount Zion. It is only because of the Lord’s condescension to dwell on Mount Zion that she may be called “beautiful” and “the joy”. *“The godly had a special feeling about Jerusalem that is beautifully and sensitively expressed in this psalm. They looked on the city, mountain, and temple as symbols of God’s presence with His people. Therefore the psalmist uses the geographical / spatial references to express the joy of God’s people with the blessed presence of God.”* (**VanGemerén**).

In *Psa.50:2* Zion is described, once again, as “the perfection of beauty.” And Zion is the perfection of beauty because the Lord has adorned her with His glory. Furthermore,

the God who revealed Himself to His people in Mt. Sinai is now shining forth from Jerusalem, the place where He has made His name to dwell.

In *Psa.129:5* we find the psalmist invoking God's judgment against those who hate Zion. The prayer is not against the Gentile pagans but against godless Israelites who have benefited from God's covenant blessings without showing love for God and the house of God.

Even in Israel things were not perfect. You had those who loved God and the house of God, who magnified God and magnified the house of God. They could not separate the two because God's dwelt in His house. God's house symbolized His presence among His people and His covenant love for them and faithfulness towards them. Yet at the same time you had those who hated Zion because they were ungodly. They were happy to reap the benefits of God's covenant faithfulness towards them and His presence among them. But the ungodliness in their hearts did not allow them to commit themselves to God or to His house or to His covenant people.

If you were living in Israel, in which group would you find yourself? Would you find yourself among those who loved God and the house of God and who magnified God and the house of God? Would you have joined in and described the house of God as glorious, beautiful and the joy of the whole earth? Or would you have found yourself among those who hated Zion?

This is the serious problem we face today among evangelicals. So many profess to be Christians, profess to be "**born again**", yet they are more than lone ranger Christians. They want no part of the visible church. They speak disparagingly of the church. Their hearts are filled with contempt for the church.

I believe *Psa.87:2-3* says something very important for us today. The psalmist wrote, "The Lord loves the gates of Zion more than all the other dwelling places of Jacob. Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God." The Lord loves the

church more than fellowship groups, more than youth groups, more than para-church groups. There is no questioning the fact that fellowship groups, youth groups and para-church groups have accomplished much for the glory of God in the building up of the kingdom of God. But these groups are “the other dwelling places of Jacob.” These groups are not Zion. These groups are not the church. The Bible explicitly declares, “The Lord loves the gates of Zion” and “Christ ... loved the church”. (*Eph.5:25*). It is Zion that is beautiful and glorious. And it is the church that is beautiful and glorious. (*Eph.5:27; Rev.21:2, 9-11*).

Very sadly, many who are bona-fide members of the church have a misplaced love in their dealings with the church. They love “the other dwelling places of Jacob” or ministries that exist in the church more than they love the church. They do not recognize that these ministries only exist because of the church. They do not recognize that these ministries could be dispensed with. But the church is indispensable. The church is God’s eternal plan.

The Bible says to us, “Be imitators of God, as beloved children.” (*Eph.5:1*). *1Pet.2:21* says Christ left us an example to follow in His steps. Paul said, “Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.” (*1Cor.11:1*). If we are obeying these commands we will love the church and treat the church with a deep and sacred respect. And we will never speak disparagingly of the church. Some people say, “*I love the church. I just do not love some of the people in the church.*” How do you separate the two when the church is the people and the people are the church?

My challenge to you is to become Christ-like in your attitudes towards the church and in your dealings with the church. Become godly in your attitudes towards the church and in your dealings with the church. Then we will offer, both corporately and individually, fragrant offerings of worship to God. And maybe then the Lord will rend the heavens and come down and bring upon us the fires of revival.

