

## Belonging to Christ's Church

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Published in *Presbyterian Network* Spring 2008

How important is the church to you? 'Christ loved the church and gave himself for her' (Eph. 5: 25). The Bible speaks constantly and profoundly of the Lord's love for his covenant people. 'For the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob is the place of his inheritance. He found him in a desert land, and in an empty howling wilderness; he encircled him, he instructed him, he kept him as the apple of his eye. As an eagle stirs up its nest, hovers over its young, spreads out its wings, takes them up, carries them on its wings, the LORD alone leads him' (Deut. 32: 9-12). 'In all their affliction, he had affliction, and the Angel of his Presence saved them; in his love and in his compassion he redeemed them, and he lifted them up and he carried them all the days of old' (Isa. 63: 9). We can learn from Christ's agonies how important the church is to him. Do you share the mind of Christ in this respect?

When anyone becomes a Christian, he undergoes a great change: he is changed inwardly, and his relationships are changed—his relationship to God, to men, and to the church. He is radically transformed: born again, he becomes a new man, a new creation; he was dead, but now he is alive in Christ (John 3; Eph. 2: 1-10; 4: 24; Gal. 6: 15). At the same time as he is united to Christ, he becomes a member of Christ's body, the church. It is not something that he has to decide to do, it is an action of God. 'For by one Spirit, we were all baptized into one body' (1 Cor. 12: 13). It is not possible to be united to Jesus Christ, the head of the church, by the indwelling Holy Spirit without also being united to fellow believers, members of the body of Christ, who are also connected to the same head, and who also have the same Spirit. As a believer, you are de facto a member of the church.

### *Not a member of a church?*

Despite this, there are men and women who profess to belong to Christ and yet do not belong to any particular church. This is a very serious matter. In his book, *Stop Dating the Church*, Joshua Harris quotes Mark Dever as saying, 'If you are not a member of the church you regularly attend, you may well be going to hell' (p.55).

Several arguments are commonly used to justify remaining outside the church membership. Let us consider them.

1. 'The church is an organism and not an organization (polarizing these two aspects).' I reply that the church is indeed, first and foremost, and essentially, a spiritual organism but the Lord has also given it organizational structure. The two are not mutually exclusive. Christ's organization serves the well-being of the organism. He gives pastors and teachers (elders) for the benefit of his body (Eph. 4: 11-16). On the day of Pentecost, those who gladly received the word were baptized and added to the church (Acts 2: 41-47). The apostles knew the number

of the disciples: at first 120, then 3,000, 5,000, and increasing (Acts 1: 15; 2: 41; 4: 4; 6: 1,7). Such a head count was common during the Old Testament period. Each local church was clearly identifiable and had its own character and difficulties (note Phil. 1:1; and Rev. 2-3).

2. 'Formality stifles spontaneity; organization is unspiritual.' I reply: this is the spirit of the age, to approve what is casual, and reject anything formal. It is the same spirit that asks, 'Why get married? What difference does a ceremony or a piece of paper (marriage certificate) make? All you need is love!' This is not God's view: marriage is public and covenantal; church membership is similarly a public, covenantal matter, involving an acceptance of privileges and responsibilities.

3. 'It is enough to belong to the "invisible church": I do not need to be received formally into the membership of a particular church.' But the distinction between the church visible and invisible is misused in this argument. Whoever will not unite with brothers locally cannot excuse himself by affirming unity with unknown men in far off lands and other times. How does he love them? John Murray asks, 'Where in the New Testament do we find the "invisible church" as an institution in which we may exercise in any concrete and practical way the fellowship claimed?' (*Collected Writings*, I, 235).

4. 'The church has many faults.' Yes, and some have been hurt by past involvement. John Calvin, who experienced much suffering in Geneva, nevertheless took pains to emphasize the duty of remaining within the church. Has she faults? Are there differences of opinion? Are there wicked people within her? Do they come to the Lord's table? If these things are so, let them not be the basis for separation, as long as the gospel is preserved and the marks of a true church are evident. Certainly 'it is a great disgrace if pigs and dogs have a place among the children of God' but do not forsake the church. Do you think it is sacrilege to take communion with the wicked? Calvin warns us not to be more rigid than Paul: let a man examine himself, not everyone else. (Institutes 4.1.11-15)

#### *Church membership necessary*

There are many reasons why the believer should be a member of a particular church.

1. Baptism signifies church membership. Have you been baptized into Christ? That baptism also marks your entrance into his church. If you separate from the church, how are you not repudiating your own baptism?

2. Partaking of the Lord's Supper requires church membership. Do you rest on Christ for salvation? He has commanded you to remember him at his table in unity with all his disciples. We are one body and partake of one bread (1 Cor. 10: 17). The Corinthians ate and drank unworthily and were judged: some died. What had they done? 'There are divisions among you' and 'do you despise the church of God?' (11: 18, 22). Disunity at the table had provoked Christ. The person who takes communion while refusing to unite with his brothers in church

membership, how can he claim to be eating and drinking in a worthy manner?

3. Excommunication, the removal of a person from the fellowship of the church, is something to be feared. Paul describes the excommunicated man as 'delivered to Satan' (1 Cor. 5: 5; 1 Tim. 1: 20). Excommunication presupposes membership: it is possible to remove someone from the church only if they did belong to it. Putting him out is to place him in Satan's sphere. But the person who refuses church membership is keeping himself in virtually the same position as the excommunicated sinner.

When Christ gave the keys of the kingdom to Peter and the apostles, he did so because he proposed to build his church. At that time, he told them that what they bound on earth would be bound in heaven; and what they loosed would be loosed in heaven (Matt. 16:18,19). This does not mean that every disciplinary action is automatically approved by God. When leaders act contrary to the revealed will of Christ in this respect, the Good Shepherd is able to admit the poor lambs that the hirelings have cast out (John 9-10). Even so, Christ intends us to recognize a correspondence between membership on earth and the Lamb's Book of Life in heaven. If a man does not have membership of Christ's church on earth, due to impenitence and unbelief, dare he presume that he has a place in the heavenly Jerusalem?

4. Christ calls us to strive for unity (Eph. 4: 1-6). We must do all in our power to outwork fully the unity of the one body and one Spirit. Christ has prayed for our unity, and what a unity—'that they all may be one, as you Father are in me and I in you; that they also may be one in us' (John 17: 21). The church's oneness is to reflect the perfect oneness of the holy Trinity.

5. Refusing to be a member anywhere is schismatic in nature, even if it is not intended to be. Schism is tearing of the church into pieces as someone would tear a piece of cloth.

6. You need pastoral care and oversight. When you were converted, you began to be a disciple and discipleship lasts for life. Christ appoints shepherds to serve him by feeding you, guiding and protecting, correcting and encouraging you. You never reach the point where such pastoral care is no longer necessary. Even if you eventually become a pastor yourself, you still remain in need of spiritual care. Christ requires his sheep to submit to his under-shepherds (1 Thess. 5: 12,13; Heb. 13: 7,17; 1 Peter 5: 1-5). Are you wiser than Christ? Are you sure that you can stand alone? Does not Paul warn against such presumption? 'Let him that thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.'

Sometimes a Christian prefers not to be a member to avoid the obligations. He wants the freedom to ignore the elders. He wants to go his own way. Such is wilful rebellion. Who can tell where it will lead?

7. You cannot grow outside the church. Why? Because Christian growth is growth of the church body into closer and stronger unity. Read Ephesians 4:11-16.

8. You cannot use your spiritual gifts unless you are part of the body. A man cannot become an elder or deacon unless he is first a member. Christ gives various spiritual gifts all for the sake of the church. Indeed, every member is necessary. No matter how insignificant you may think you are, you are needed! The ear cannot say, 'Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body' (1 Cor. 12: 12-30). Those who stand apart from the body are hindering themselves from bearing much fruit. They withhold obedience to Christ and, in their folly, forfeit his reward, at least in part.

9. It is every believer's responsibility to encourage others in their Christian walk and to set an example fit to be followed. This is a vital principle of Christian conduct: we must be careful what effect our behaviour has on others. We dare not stumble a young believer. We should set a good example.

Whenever we consider a course of action, we should ask ourselves, What would happen if everyone followed my example? What if everyone refused to join the church? What if everyone didn't attend the services today? What if everyone withheld their offerings? If everyone did what you do, would it build up and encourage, or would it weaken and destroy Christ's beloved bride?

10. Christ's new commandment – 'as I have loved you, that you also love one another' (John 13: 34) – requires us to join the church. Where will you exercise that love, if not within the church, the family of God?

*What kind of member?*

Finally, what does Christ seek in the members of his body? What is the biblical standard for church membership? What is our high calling?

The whole of Scripture sets out before us the answer to this question but we can mention certain things.

Faithful attendance at the meetings of the church is fundamental. There the Bread of Life is held out in the Word of God read and preached and in the Lord's Supper. If you are frequently absent, something fundamental is wrong. The Spirit of Christ creates in his members a strong desire for the means of grace.

Diligent hearing of God's Word is also fundamental. The wise Christian will place great value on the preaching of the truth. It is his nourishment. He will do all in his power to grasp the doctrine, to meditate on it, and to let it shape his thinking and his conduct.

Significant involvement in the life of your Christian brothers and sisters is essential. Christianity is a way of life, not merely attending church services. How can we love and serve one another if we do not know one another? Do we weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice? Do we bear one another's burdens? If you only ever see your brothers in services, and your front door is closed to them, then you do not conform to the biblical pattern for fellowship.

Life abundant is the promise of Christ. It is essential that a member be spiritually

alive (otherwise he is a member in name only, a goat and not a sheep, a tare and not wheat). Where there is life, it must grow and flourish. The believer will seek every opportunity to serve the Lord.

Consider Romans 12! Hear the trumpet sound! 'Living sacrifices'; 'fervent in spirit' ... here is a charter for church membership.

Surely ten believers on fire for the Lord will accomplish more for him than a thousand lukewarm.

True church membership is a challenge capable of overwhelming us in our inadequacy and failure. However, Christ does not call us and leave us to summon up our own strength. Quite the opposite, What he seeks he promises to supply. God is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think according to the power that works in us – that same power which he exercised in raising Christ from the dead and exalting him to highest heaven – the Holy Spirit's almighty grace. We are his workmanship.

To him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus.