

## Church Membership

Many of the pundits are claiming that our society is suffering from a new phobia; we know about agoraphobia and claustrophobia and even arachnophobia. But this condition is “commitment phobia”. **Commitment phobia is the fear that in promising to do something good we will miss out on getting to do something even better.** And so, although there are many good things which we could be doing or could be involved in, we would rather not make the commitment and, as we say, we prefer to “keep our options open”. Ask any minister or pastor about the response he gets from his church members when he approaches someone to ask them to help in some aspect of the work of the congregation. *“Let me think about it”,* we say. *“I’ll get back to you when I have looked at my schedule.”* Some people just don’t want to be committed.

It’s a phobia that affects personal relationships. More and more couples are hesitant about taking the step of commitment and are opting for cohabitation rather than for marriage. They don’t like the idea of a permanent relationship with no “get out” clauses. They listen to older married people saying things like, “I never knew what happiness was until I got married ... and then it was too late!” Or the man who said, “marriage is a bit like taking a bath; when you’re in it for a while, it’s not so hot!”

And when it comes to church membership, many people are reluctant and resistant to the idea of committing themselves to a local church or congregation. They like to attend; they enjoy the fellowship and appreciate the worship and the preaching; but they just don’t want to be committed to the requirements and standards of church membership.

And when one thinks about it, it’s rather strange that one would profess to be a follower of Jesus Christ and yet not be prepared to become a member of Christ’s church. You see, when we commit our lives to Jesus Christ we are refusing to keep our options open. Following Christ means taking up our cross and following him on the narrow way. The Christian life, in that sense, is restrictive and confining and demanding. But we know that it is the only path worth following. And if we are ready to overcome all commitment-phobia to follow Christ, then we should not be hesitant about being committed to his church.

I am convinced, on the basis of what the Bible teaches, that there are enormous benefits from committing ourselves to the membership of the local church. And I am also persuaded that a proper understanding of church membership lies at the heart of vital and healthy churches. If our churches are going to be what God intended them to be in terms of seeing the kingdom of Christ advance, then we need to know and understand what it means to be counted as members of that church.

There is an understanding of church membership has been preserved in the history of the church. Away back in the 3rd century, Cyprian of Carthage, a leading figure in the African church, insisted on the unity and centrality of the church, and the absolute necessity of belonging to the church.

*“Whoever is separated from the church is joined with an adulteress, and separated from the promises of the church. No one who leaves the church of Christ can attain the rewards of Christ. No one can have God for a father unless they have the church as their mother. If any had been able to escape outside Noah’s Ark, there might be a way of escape for those who are outside the church.”*

The great Genevan Reformer, John Calvin, believed the same:

*“Let us learn from the simple title “mother” how useful, indeed how necessary, it is that we should know her. For there is no other way to enter life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance until, putting off mortal flesh, we become like the angels ... God’s fatherly favour and the especial witness of spiritual life are limited to his flock, so that it is always disastrous to leave the church.”* (Inst. IV, 1,4)

Our Westminster Confession of Faith is slightly more cautious than Calvin, but it is still quite direct and clear: “out of [the church] there is no ordinary possibility of salvation” (XXV, 2). That wording suggests that in some extraordinary cases individuals may be saved without joining the church, for example, the inhabitants of remote islands or people who come to Christ for salvation on their deathbeds. In that very limited sense, church membership may be considered optional. But outside of the church there is no ordinary possibility of salvation. If you are not a full member of this or another orthodox church, you should not be complacent or content. You are in great spiritual danger. R.B. Kuiper says that the Scriptural rule is that while membership of the church is not a prerequisite for salvation, it is a necessary consequence of salvation.

We have to say that being involved in a local church without being a member of that church is a bit like a couple who live together without getting married. And they may use the same arguments that cohabiting

couples use to justify their lifestyle. *“How can we be sure that it’s going to work if we don’t give it a try for a while? If things don’t work out, then we can move on and try somewhere else, another partner, another church.”* Of course what cohabiting couples don’t realize is that the one thing necessary to a successful relationship is the unbreakable commitment which is made in the covenant of marriage. And for those who may be active in the life of a local church without being members, it is nonetheless true, in spite of their involvement, that they remain outside the covenant relationship with the body of Christ which God requires. To put it in theological terms, they separate union with Christ, the Head of the church, from union with his Body. They confuse themselves and they confuse others about what it means to be a Christian. There is no union with Christ apart from the communion of the saints. Nor can the saints have true communion without belonging to one another, and that happens by belonging to Christ in his church.

Let me try to unpack why church membership is important and how it is clearly founded on the teaching of Scripture.

## **1. Church membership is an expression of our identity in Christ.**

In Ephesians 2 and 3 Paul spells out a clear doctrine of the church as being comprised of Jews and Gentiles. Whereas Gentiles had once been excluded from God’s family, through the blood of Christ they have now been included. It has always been God’s purpose to create one people to be his own people. In the OT that people was called Israel, but in the NT era it is the church, the body of Christ, comprised of both Jew and Gentile. And God makes them one new people by uniting them with Jesus Christ. If anyone is “in Christ” then he or she is joined or built together with all others who are “in Christ”. And, says, Paul, all this is a great mystery. It was all concealed in shadows and types in the OT era, but now in the era of the Spirit it has come to light in a clear and brilliant way.

You see, the NT doctrine of the church is grounded in the doctrine of the believer’s union with Christ. Paul makes it magnificently clear that when we are united to Christ we are united to the rest of God’s people. It was Matthew Henry who said that we cannot be saved apart from the rest of God’s people. When we take God for our God we necessarily take his people for our people. The church, you see, is not an afterthought with God. It is not an appendix to God’s great saving purposes. It is not marginal or peripheral. The church lies at the very heart and centre of God’s glorious, eternal plan of salvation.

Your identity as a child of God places you in God’s family with all your brothers and sisters, and in relationship to your Elder Brother, Christ Himself. By not being part of the visible church, you are denying your spiritual identity.

But there is another aspect of theological truth that helps us appreciate the importance of church membership. Jesus Christ, the King and Head of the church, is now ascended to the Father’s right hand. The ascension and enthronement of Christ is a fulfilment of the prophecy in Psalm 110: *“The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.”* But why is that doctrine important for church membership?

Well, it means that now that his incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension are behind him, Jesus has received from his Father the position and authority that he was promised. The successful completion of his earthly work has meant that Jesus is now exalted above all created rule and authority and power. As Paul puts it in Ephesians 1, the Father has put all things under Christ’s feet and has given him *“as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all”*. With Christ’s heavenly session, a new era has begun. He is bringing all things to their proper fulfilment and completion. And the church on earth is to be the visible manifestation of Christ’s heavenly rule.

So in Ephesians 4 Paul goes on to say that when Christ ascended he led captivity captive and gave gifts to men as proof of the fact that he is reigning at the Father’s right hand. And, this is the interesting bit: the gifts that he gave were church officers. Divinely called apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers have been given for the edification of the church. And the fact that the ascended Christ has given such gifts to his church must mean two things: it means that we must need them, and it means that godly church officers are the evidence and proof that Jesus is the Head and King of his people, the church.

When people refuse to become members of the church they are in effect saying, *“I don’t need the gift of a pastor or a teacher. I can be my own elder and my own pastor. I can shepherd myself.”* But the King of the church does not intend that you live in such isolation. In his great wisdom and love for you, he has given you this most precious and necessary gift, the gift of leadership and counsel and spiritual direction. As a member of the body of Christ, this is your identity. Refusing to be involved in the church you are denying what you

really are in Christ. You cannot claim to be part of the Body of Christ without also submitting and responding to the Headship of Christ as it is exercised through his church.

That brings us to this second point:

## **2. Church membership is the means by which we grow spiritually.**

When you begin to look at the history of the church, then it is clear that from the time of the early church right through the Reformation and into the Puritan era, Christians have always understood that spiritual growth does not take place in isolation from other Christians. It is in the fellowship of the local church that the means of grace are available and are exercised and used. And that understanding of the task of the local church is reflected in our Confession of Faith:

*“Unto this catholic visible church Christ hath given the ministry, oracles and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints in this life, to the end of the world; and doth by his own presence and Spirit, according to his promise, make them effectual thereunto.” XXV, 3*

It is within the fellowship of the church that you and I can fulfil the purpose for which we have been created by God and recreated by Christ. The church is the place where spiritual growth happens. And the Confession points out the three things which God has given to the church so that it can achieve its goal of not only gathering but perfecting the saints in this life. The church has been given “the ministry, oracles and ordinances of God”.

“Ministry” means primarily the pastoral ministry of the church which is exercised through the teaching and ruling elders in the church. Pastors and elders have been given a very clear job description. They are meant *“to prepare God’s people for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”* (Eph 4:12) Under the teaching and shepherding of the elders, the church members are meant to make significant progress in their Christian lives. Christians need that kind of help and counsel and guidance. You aren’t meant to struggle on by yourself without the support of wise and good and godly elders. They are literally God’s gift to the church so that God’s people may become mature.

The “oracles” of the church are the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. The church proclaims and teaches the Bible. All of its evangelism, preaching, counselling and serving are directed and controlled by the Word of God. As a result the saints are not only gathered, but they are perfected by putting the teaching of the Bible into practice. Have you ever come out of church after hearing a sermon and said, *“Now I know what that section of the Bible means. I didn’t understand it before, but now I know what God wants me to do.”* That is how church membership and church involvement contributes to your growth in grace. It enables you to have a clear picture of God’s purpose and will for your life.

The “ordinances” of God are the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Baptism is part of the gathering of the saints. And the Lord’s Supper is part of the perfecting of the saints. As we feed on the spiritual body and blood of Jesus Christ, we are nourished for Christian obedience. Our souls are strengthened and our faith is focused on Christ.

Of course we shouldn’t think that the ministry, oracles and ordinances operate by themselves. Their effectiveness depends upon the grace of God and the power of the Spirit. As the Confession says, it is Jesus Christ by his own presence and Spirit who makes them effective. The elders, the Bible and the sacraments of the church are dependent on the power of Christ and the Holy Spirit if they are to make a difference in people’s lives. But it is through these means that God has promised to work in the lives of his people. These are the means by which the saints are perfected in this life.

That is why we should value church membership. That is why we should be concerned about people who absent themselves from the church. They are ignoring and devaluing the gifts which God has given for their growth and spiritual development. We cannot set these blessings aside and think that we will live healthy Christian lives. God knows us, and he knows our needs. That is why he desires that we place ourselves within the fellowship of his church. That brings us to this third point:

## **3. Church membership is the way in which you and I may bring glory to Christ.**

Christ has a great plan for his church. Paul summarises it in Ephesians 5 under the picture of the church as the Bride of Christ who appears beautiful and glorious and perfect on her wedding day.

*“Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.”*

Right now, the church as the Bride of Christ, is often stained and blemished. So long as she remains in this corrupt world, she will be spattered and polluted by its sin and corruption. So long as we have indwelling sin, we will not be perfect. But, one day, the church will be presented as a glorious and radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish. And when Christ presents her, with all the principalities and powers and potentates of heaven looking on, there will not be a single spot to be seen. The most careful examination and scrutiny will not be able to detect the slightest speck of unworthiness or sin.

You remember how Paul has already expressed this in chapter 3 of that same Ephesian epistle? *“His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.”* These rulers and authorities will be looking on. And Christ will present her to them and invite their inspection. And he will be able to say *“Look at what my wisdom and grace and love have accomplished in these redeemed sinners!”* And they will not be able to find one stain or spot or imperfection.

*“Without wrinkles”* says Paul. Wrinkles can be a sign of disease or some constitutional disorder, but mostly they are a sign of age. The older we get, the more wrinkles we develop as our skin loses its elasticity. And we try to counter the wrinkles with creams and lotions and plastic surgery. And that’s only us men! And it’s true that the church is often wrinkled through strain and decay and failure. But when that great day comes, there will not be a wrinkle. Everything will be smoothed out. Her appearance will be perfect, whole and smooth and radiant.

John Owen referred to the Holy Spirit as “the great beautifier of souls”. And the day will come when the Divine Beauty Therapist will have done his work. The massaging will have been so perfect that there will not be a single wrinkle to be seen. She will look young, in the bloom of youth, with colour in her cheeks. The body of humiliation will have gone and she will be transformed and transfigured into the body of her glorification. She will be holy and blameless. Christ will see to it that it will be completed. Isn’t that what Paul has already said in this letter in the form of his doxology at the end of Ephesians chapter 3?

*“Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we can ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.”*

*Finish then thy new creation  
Pure and spotless let us be  
Let us see thy great salvation  
Perfectly restored in Thee  
Changed from glory into glory,  
Till in heaven we take our place  
Till we cast our crowns before Thee  
Lost in wonder, love and praise.*

Now the point is that all this happens in the church. The church is the means by which God’s glory will be displayed. There is not some other way or some alternative plan which God has in place to bring glory to himself. It is in and through his church that he works for his own glory.

By being part of his church, you and I give Christ the glory which is his due. By allying ourselves to his people in the fellowship of his church, by identifying ourselves with Christ and by fighting in the colours of his people, we become part of that great plan through which God will be glorified. We commit ourselves to the church enthusiastically and wholeheartedly. By separating ourselves from the church we are missing out on the greatest opportunity to glorify Christ in this world and in the world to come. Refusing to get involved in church, we do not end up “keeping our options open” with the chance of getting involved with something better and greater. We actually shut the door on the greatest way which God has ordained for seeing his kingdom advance and glory being brought to his name.