

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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What About Church Membership?

In preparation for this message, I googled the topic and discovered that there exists a very widespread opinion that the whole concept of requiring Church membership is decidedly frowned upon by a lot of people claiming to be genuine Christians. One fellow declared, “Scripture does not require membership in the man made sense of the word in a local *church*. All Christians are automatically members of the Church. If Jesus accepts you simply by following Him, who are we to add another layer or ‘membership’ to that? Local churches should not require membership, except for that required by law to exist.” Another said, “I am not a member of First Baptist where I attend, however there has been reference to this as to sex outside the marriage. Really makes me wonder what is going on. To me, membership is all about money and budget. Even my Pastor Ed is missing the boat.” Still another was even more opinionated, “I have found that church membership has more to do with controlling the congregation than it does with following Jesus.”¹ This illustration is not all that uncommon. “Alice was livid! This was the first time she’d visited this church. The last time, too, she thought. The church had celebrated the Lord’s Supper. I’ve been a Christian for four years and the pastor had the gall to tell me to stay away from Communion, Alice fumed. He asked those who are not right with God or his church to take steps to get right before coming to the Lord’s Table. He included me just because I’m not a church member. How dare he!”² These kinds of statements are fairly typical and reflect the mindset of the overall U.S. population. Recently Trinity College in Connecticut conducted an *America Religious Identification Survey 2008* that highlighted the following:

- ❖ The American population self-identifies as predominantly Christian but Americans are slowly becoming less Christian.
- ❖ 86% of American adults identified as Christians in 1990 and 76% in 2008.
- ❖ The historic Mainline churches and denominations have experienced the steepest declines while the nondenominational Christian identity has been trending upward particularly since 2001.
- ❖ The challenge to Christianity in the U.S. does not come from other religions but rather from a rejection of all forms of organized religion.
- ❖ 34% of American adults considered themselves “Born Again or Evangelical Christians” in 2008.
- ❖ The U.S. population continues to show signs of becoming less religious, with one out of every five Americans failing to indicate a religious identity in 2008.

Equally distressing is the large number of those claiming to be Evangelical Christians who showed little interest in being identified with a local Church. The survey concluded, “Overall the 1990-2008 ARIS time series shows that changes in religious self-identification in the first decade of the 21st century have been moderate in comparison to the 1990’s, which was a period of significant shifts in the religious composition of the United States.”³ The sad thing about this is that popular Evangelicalism over the past few decades has actually incubated this brood! Mike Horton recently opined, ... “We carve up Christ’s body into socioeconomic and generational segments. The youth group is of relatively recent vintage: an invention of the 1960s and ‘70s. And now it has taken on a life of its own. Often young people grow up in the church without ever really being in the church and worshipping together with the saints who have walked with the Lord for many years. Then we wonder why they are not integrated into the church when they leave for college and prefer to join a college ministry but not the local church.”⁴ It’s not uncommon in our day for misguided Christians, like the ones cited earlier – to regard joining a church as an option. We have already documented in this series the efforts of George Barna in calling believers to become *Revolutionaries* and seek fellowship outside the local church. And given the other options—books, tapes, videos, radio and TV broadcasts, Internet resources, parachurch groups, etc.—joining the church is sometimes low on the list—if it’s even on the list! Many have never regarded committing to a congregation to be all that important—or all that agreeable. They are usually shocked to hear that Christians have historically regarded joining a church as essential, not optional. Is this historic Christian conviction arbitrary? Is it legalistic? What does God’s Word have to say about church membership?

I. CONNECT THE DOTS: BIBLICAL INJUNCTIONS THAT ASSUME CHURCH MEMBERSHIP.

- A. Matthew 18:15-17 “If your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to *the church*; and if he refuses to listen even to *the church*, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer.”
- B. I Corinthians 7:17 Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk. And thus I direct in all *the churches*.
- C. I Corinthians 11:16 But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have *the churches* of God.
- D. Hebrews 12:22-23 “You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of righteous men made perfect...”
- E. Most of the Epistles in the New Testament are not addressed to individual Christians but to churches. When an apostle wanted to get a message to all the Christians in a certain area he addressed a letter to *the churches* of that area. See I Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1b; Gal. 1:2b I Thes. 1:1; 2 Thes. 1:1; Rev. 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14. Does this not imply that the apostles expected that every Christian was a part of a local church and that by communicating with the churches, they would be reaching all the Christians in that area?
- F. Compare also Colossians 4:16 “When this letter is read among you, have it also read in *the church* of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter that is coming from Laodicea.”

II. THE OLD TESTAMENT PATTERN

My good friend Scott Clark (professor of History Theology at Westminster Seminary Calif.) has addressed this in convincing fashion. There is a widespread notion that a truly Spirit-led congregation would not keep anything so earthly as membership records. This is an unfounded and unbiblical assumption which does not square with biblical history and teaching.

- A. In the Old Covenant, God is a bookkeeper. In Exodus 32:32 we see a very interesting phrase. In a prayer, Moses pleads with God not to blot him out of “the Book you have written.” The Lord replies to Moses that He will indeed blot anyone who sins out of His “Book.” David declares in Psalm 9:5 that the Lord has “blotted out” the name of his enemies forever. In Psalm 40:7 David is assured that his righteousness is written on God’s scroll.
- B. Many of these same themes regarding the “Book of Life” are evident in the Revelation of the Apostle John. To the Church in Sardis the Lord Jesus writes that He will not “blot out his name from the Book of Life” who is faithful and obedient to the Lord. Revelation 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; also refer to the Book of Life. It would seem that we are to conceive of a divinely kept book in which are recorded the names of all believers of all ages. This is not to say that there is an actual book, though there may well be.
- C. In Psalm 69:28 David prays for the utter destruction of enemies and for them to be blotted out of “The Book of Life” and not to be listed with the righteous. In this same Psalm vv. 9, 10, David turns from the “book” to speak twice of the Qahal (this is the Hebrew word for assembly, which is translated in the LXX with Ekklesia and Synagogue cf. Deuteronomy 9:10, 14, where these two ideas are also closely connected). There is a close connection in David’s mind between the Qahal and the “book.” Because God is revealed as a bookkeeper, His Covenant people were also (according to the commandments of God) also bookkeepers.
- D. There is significant evidence that in the Old Covenant there were membership rolls with the names of all the Covenant families and the Covenant heads of households. Genesis 5:1ff. speaks of the “book of the generations.” Moses worked from existing books in compiling his (selective) genealogies. This idea of membership roll figured conspicuously in the life of the Qahal. Later after the exile when the beginnings of the Synagogue can be traced, there is archeological evidence that there were membership rolls there as well. It took at least twelve men in good standing in the community to form a synagogue.
- E. There is a great deal of unity and continuity between the Old Covenant conception of the Qahal and the New Covenant Ekklesia. Thus there is good reason to suspect that there is continuity in the practice of record keeping. Remember that in both the Old Covenant and the New Covenant, one had to join the visible assembly and take the sign of the Covenant. The most obvious examples of this sort of record keeping are the genealogies of Matthew 1:1-7 and Luke 3:23-38. We know from Acts that the Apostles met first in the temple, and then later during missionary journeys, in the synagogue. The organization of the synagogue did play some roll in the beginning of the visible Church. We see in Luke 4:18ff. that

there was a reading of the Scriptures and an exposition of the Scriptures in the Synagogue. This practice was continued in the early New Covenant Church.

- F. Another piece of evidence which adds to the presumption of Church membership in the New Covenant Church is the mention in Acts 16:5 that the Church grew greatly in numbers. If the Church in the New Covenant largely equals the Qahal of the Old Covenant and if it grew in numbers then we can fairly say that these converts ‘joined’ the Church. There is positive evidence of record keeping (membership lists) in the New Covenant Church. The problem in the daily distribution of bread in Acts 6:1 assumes some sort of record keeping of eligible widows. In I Timothy 5:9-16, Paul speaks explicitly about a list of names of Christian widows who were eligible for financial assistance from the Church. He even lays out the qualifications to be on the list. If the Church kept such lists for financial aid, can we reasonably assume that these widows were not on a membership roll? Moreover we cannot help but notice that again Paul’s instructions regarding widows presupposes some sort of organized visible body of Christ who administered this aid to its members.⁵

III. STRONG INFERENCES: BIBLICAL EXPECTATIONS

- A. We should take responsibility to discipline those of the body who do not repent from public sin that brings reproach on the name of Christ. Paul implies this in I Corinthians 5:12-13 where he deals with the necessity of putting someone out of the church. He says, “What have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. ‘Purge the evil person from among you.’”
- B. We should declare ourselves part of the body so that if we are wayward, we ourselves would be liable to such exclusion. Church membership is implied in the metaphor of the *body* in I Corinthians 12:12-31. The original meaning of the word *member* is member of a body, like hand and foot and eye and ear. That’s the imagery behind the word *member* in the text. Verse 12: “Just as the body is one and has many *members*, and all the *members* of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.”
- C. We should take our position under the leadership and authority of a particular group of elders. Church membership is implied in the biblical requirement of Christians to be submitted to a group of church leaders, elders, or pastors. The point here is that without membership, who is it that the New Testament is referring to who must submit to a specific group of leaders? Some kind of expressed willingness or covenant or agreement or commitment (that is, membership) has to precede a person’s submission to a group of leaders. Consider the way the New Testament talks about the relationship of the church to her leaders.

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. (Hebrews 13:17)

We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and *are over you*) in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. (I Thessalonians 5:12-13)

Let the *elders who rule well* be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. (I Timothy 5:17)

- D. We should declare ourselves part of a group who expect to be watched over and cared for by a particular group of elders.

And we should find our place in the organic whole as a body part—a member—of a local body of Christ. Church membership is implied in the way the New Testament requires elders to care for the flock in their charge. Of course elders can extend their love to anyone and everyone, and should, within the limits of their ability. But the question is whether the Bible tells elders that they are to have a special responsibility and care for a certain group—a group of members. Consider Acts 20:28 where Paul tells the elders how to care for their flock.

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all *the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers*, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

This verse does not say elders cannot visit unbelievers or those who are not yet members. But it does make clear that their first responsibility is to a particular flock. How are they to know who their flock is? Who are we as elders and pastors responsible for? For whom will we give an account to God? The way Peter speaks to the elders in I Peter 5 is even more clear on this point. Verses 2-3: “Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over *those in your charge*, but being examples to the flock.” “Those in your charge” (your portion, your lot) implies that the elders knew whom they were responsible for. This is just another way of talking about membership. If a person does not want to be held accountable by a group of elders or be the special focus of the care of a group of elders, they will

resist the idea of membership. And they will resist God's appointed way for them to live and be sustained in their faith.⁶

CONCLUSION: Much of today's Evangelicalism is characterized by the distinct American tendency towards individualism and personal autonomy. This trait tends to view all external authorities and institutions with deep suspicion. The emphasis here falls squarely on the privatization of personal experience, and the highly subjective sensibilities of the individual (or as its often referred to as simply having a "gut feeling" or intuition). As a result, now more than ever, we see a growing number of *churchless evangelicals* (or as Jay Adams calls them *Church Tramps*⁷). Scott Clark, once again pinpoints the issue we are dealing with. Were these churchless evangelicals to unite themselves to a local church they should have to relinquish their autonomy. They should have to submit themselves not only to a particular expression of the historic church (which is distasteful enough) but they should also have to submit themselves to a "church order" (a way of doing things), and to elders and to discipline. Even more fundamentally, they should have to agree and submit to "means" or media of grace, to a human ministry (administration) of the Gospel and the sacraments. No longer can Christianity be a purely private affair. It would now be public and it would entail being accountable to humans and being served by Christ through human ministry. In the church Christ operates through ministers who preach the gospel and from whom we receive the sacraments. In the church, the Spirit does not operate extemporaneously, but through divinely ordained, physical means. We meet Christ in the announcement of the Good News and we are reassured that it's all really true in the sacraments, real bread and wine, and in real baptismal water.⁸ Church membership, as it turns, out is critically important, both biblically and theologically as well as practically. Churches that fail to require it are doomed to suffer the consequences and chaos that always attend churchless Evangelicals and their notorious individualism.

ENDNOTES

¹ Cf. Religion, Can anyone support the reason for church membership..?

<http://in.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20070409181043AA8Au3N>.

² From *Why Join a Church?* By Rev. Larry Wilson and Rev. Mark Brown, <http://www.ropcolympia.org/resources/1wilson-membership.html>.

³ <http://www.americanreligionsurvey-aris.org/reports/highlights.html>.

⁴ M. Horton, *The Gospel-Driven Life: Bring Good News People Into a Bad News Word* (Baker, 2009) p. 194.

⁵ <http://heidelblog.wordpress.com/2009/09/29/why-membership-matters/>

⁶ This section is adopted with modification from John Piper,
http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByDate/2008/2989_How_Importan...

⁷ This insightful analysis is available at <http://www.nouthetic.org/blog/?p=200>.

⁸ <http://heidelblog.wordpress.com/2008/12/27/on-churchless-evangelicals-pt1/>