

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP?

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We might as well address the proverbial 500 pound gorilla in the room. Is church membership necessary? I cannot count the times that I have had someone comment, "I love God but I am just not interested in the church." People may even claim to have a personal relationship with Christ, but no involvement in a church. The lack of interest in church membership is a natural byproduct of those who espouse a "churchless Christianity." This sentiment describes the "I-love-Jesus-but-I-don't-need-the-church" crowd.

Some people see church membership as a secondary issue. They treat it as a quaint and slightly outdated proposition of a bygone era when church membership was a cultural necessity. After all, it would be difficult to sell insurance, cars, funeral plots, etc. in a small community unless one was in good standing with a local church. For such people, church membership is simply one entry on the resume and often treated with less value than membership in a social or country club.

Some people want to be involved in a church without going through the process of joining, which often requires a rite of entry such as baptism, a membership class, or a covenant. Is this "let's-just-enjoy-the-benefits-without-membership-option" any different than couples who choose to live together without the traditional commitment of marriage? These couples see traditional marriage as a secondary matter as long as they are in a committed, loving relationship. The "let's-not-join" crowd has a similar attitude toward church membership.

Still other people see membership at one particular church as a hindrance to their spiritual freedom and personal development. They argue that they are part of several local churches. They attend one church for the music and preaching, another for youth or children activities, and still another for a men's or ladies' Bible study. They may even say they belong to the "universal church" but do not want to be tied to any "local church."

The underlying theme in all these scenarios is that they are self-centered and not Christ-centered or kingdom-focused. The central question being asked by many people is "what is best or most convenient for me and my family." Many modern day options are a thinly disguised excuse for the unwillingness to make a commitment and be held accountable.

I want to change the question from "is church membership necessary" to "is church membership biblical?" If it is a biblical norm, then it is a Christian responsibility and privilege. Does the Bible teach church membership? I would agree that it would take exegetical gymnastics to point to a single proof text that declares one must join a church. Yet I think the pattern of a covenant relationship with fellow-believers is clearly and consistently taught throughout the New Testament.

The Pattern Established in Acts

The purpose of the book of Acts is to demonstrate the activity of the Holy Spirit through the apostles as they were obedient to the task assigned them as witnesses, beginning in Jerusalem and extending to the ends of the earth (Acts. 1:8). A brief survey of the book demonstrates that the strategy of the Holy Spirit was to establish communities of believers (churches) throughout the known world. The advance of the kingdom on earth depends upon a church planting strategy because the church is the visible body of Christ on earth and the chosen instrument for kingdom advance.

The Birth of the Church

It is fair to say that Pentecost was the birthday of the church. Peter's message and call to repentance had such a profound impact that 3,000 souls were added that day (Acts 2:41). We must ask "added to what" or, rather, "to whom." The context makes it clear that these 3,000 persons were added to existing believers in such a manner that they formed a distinct community where apostolic teaching, unique fellowship expressed in a tangible way, unity, and worship became the norm (2:43-47). The phrase "added to their number" is repeated again in 2:47 and 5:14. The emphasis on numbers is not simply a means of demonstrating the vitality of the early church; it is an indication that there existed some means of keeping track of those persons who were part of this growing community of believers.

Peter and John were arrested for preaching and were taken before the chief priests and elders to be examined (Acts 4). Since the authorities could not deny the visible evidence that accompanied the apostles' preaching, they threatened and released them. When released, Peter and John went to the place where their own companions were gathered for prayer. They gave a report to a group of believers who gathered at a place clearly known to them.

This event was followed by a summary statement (4:32-37) that was similar to 2:43-47. This Spirit-filled community continued to express fellowship by providing for one another's needs to such an extent that there was not a needy person among them. The word rendered *congregation* used in 4:32 had acquired the sense of a civic or religious community in other first century writings. The use of this word indicates that the early believers were developing both structure and identity.

The First Use of the Word *Church*

This story of sacrificial giving and community living was followed by the tragic story of the deceit of Ananias and Sapphira, who pledged a piece of property and then failed to give the full sale price of the property. As a result, both husband and wife died and "Great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard these things" (5:11).

This instance was the first use of the word *church* (*ecclesia*) in Acts. This word was used by Jesus in Matthew 16:18 when He announced His intention of building His own church. The Greek word has both a Gentile and Jewish background. In secular Greek, it denotes the gathering of citizens of a Greek city (cf. Acts 19:23). Its Jewish background is more significant to us. When the Old Testament was translated into Greek (Septuagint), *ecclesia* was used to denote the

Jewish people as the “congregation of Yahweh.” The use of this word leaves little doubt that we are now dealing with a group of people who were bound together in such a manner that they comprised an identifiable community with both rights and responsibilities.

The Developing Structure of the Church

Chapter six provides a clear indication of identifiable leadership, structure, and community participation. The growth of the church created a crisis which became an opportunity. The congregation was providing support for the needy widows. These women may have been abandoned by their Jewish families when they became followers of Christ. The twelve, who were clearly the leaders of the church in Jerusalem, summoned the congregation and asked them to select men who would be qualified to take care of the widows. The congregation selected seven men for this task and brought them before the apostles who commissioned them. We can conclude that a process for congregational decision making was clearly developing.

The Scattering of the Church

The success of the church led to persecution and the scattering of the believers. Saul was not content to drive the Christians out of Jerusalem, he desired to pursue these followers of “the Way” and bring them back to Jerusalem for imprisonment (9:1-3). The name, “the Way,” is found again in 19:9, 23, 22:4, 24:14, 22. Likely, this term was used by the early Christians to denote their movement as a way of life or redemption. It may well have been a clear echo of Jesus’ statement in John 14:6. By this early date a group of people existed who were identifiable to those believers within and those opponents outside the group.

Some of the persons scattered by the persecution came to Antioch and preached the Lord Jesus to both Jews and Greeks. The news of the large number of converts in Antioch soon reached the ears of the church in Jerusalem who sent Barnabas to Antioch (11:21-22). Barnabas was sent as a representative of the mother church in Jerusalem. This action suggests there was a growing sense of awareness of the need for doctrinal accountability as the Spirit expanded the church to areas beyond Jerusalem.

Barnabas, in turn, brought a converted Saul to Antioch. “And for an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch” (11:26). Most commentators believe this name was applied to early followers of Christ by the pagans of Antioch. While Christ (*Christos*) would be the name of an office to the Greek-speaking Jews, to the pagans of Antioch it was the name of the man of whom these people were always talking. Thus they called them the “Christ-people.”

The verb translated “were called” literally means to “transact business” under a particular name. This connotation has led some scholars to argue that the Christians applied this name to themselves.¹ In either case, we can see that groups of people in various locations could be identified as belonging to Christ. These individuals met together for worship and fellowship, were held accountable for the integrity of their teaching, had identifiable leaders, and desired to convince others to join their movement.

The story of the church in Antioch continues in Acts 13:1-3. Verse one indicates that a clearly defined leadership structure had been established. The second verse indicates that a pattern of worship and prayer was practiced by the members of the community. In the third verse, the believers in Antioch responded to the urging of the Spirit by commissioning Paul and

Barnabas to begin a church planting movement. The repeated reference to “they” indicates the decision to commission Paul and Barnabas was ratified by the whole church. Thus, when the missionaries returned to Antioch, it was appropriate that they “gathered the church together” to report “all things that God had done” (14:27). The first missionaries were sent by the church in Antioch and were held accountable by that church. Luke, in this same context, tells us that Paul and Barnabas planted churches and appointed leaders in every church to facilitate continued growth (14:23).

The Council in Jerusalem

The success of the Gentile ministry created a situation that demanded doctrinal clarification. The question was, “Must a Gentile be circumcised to be saved?” Since the church at Antioch commissioned Paul and Barnabas for their mission trip, they sent them along with “some others” to Jerusalem to clarify the matter. Luke specifies that these men were sent “by the church” (15:3). When they arrived in Jerusalem they were received “by the church and the apostles and the elders” (15:4).

After a time of lively discussion, a decision was made. It seemed good to the leaders and the whole church to choose men and send them to Antioch with a letter detailing the decision reached by those meeting in Jerusalem (15:22). When they arrived in Antioch, they “gathered the congregation together” and delivered the letter (15:30). Later Paul and Timothy revisited several established churches and delivered the decrees decided upon in Jerusalem (16:4). Not only do we see clearly defined local churches, but we see a linking together of these churches for mutual support and accountability.

As the Acts’ account progresses, we learn that these early communities developed a consistent pattern of gathering on the first day of the week to worship, distinguishing them from the Jews who gathered on the Sabbath (20:7). The leaders of various churches were known and thus could be encouraged to care for and give administrative oversight to individuals whom the Holy Spirit had placed in their charge (20:28).

The book of Acts presents a consistent and convincing picture that the early believers gathered in identifiable communities with recognizable leaders and developed a pattern of congregational structure and accountability. Further, we can conclude that these various church bodies were aware of and in communication with each other.

The Letters to the Churches

The Pauline letters are a strong testimony to the existence of established churches with a membership that could be called together to hear and respond to the teaching of their founding apostle. Someone in each church had to receive the letter, summon the church to hear the letter, and then report again to Paul about the response to the letter. These letters were later collected, shared, and preserved by these same churches.

1 Corinthians 1:2 not only speaks of the church of God which is at Corinth, it further indicates that Paul understood that this letter would be read by other “saints by calling” who were in other places. In this particular letter, Paul spoke of a sin of sexual immorality which is not even practiced among the Gentiles (5:1). Paul gave instructions that when they were “assembled” they should follow his instructions and “deliver such a one to Satan,” which means to exercise church discipline and put the offender outside the assembly. We can conclude that

discipline and accountability were exercised by the early church. It is possible that 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 speaks of the reinstatement of the brother who had been punished by the majority (2:6). The word *majority* suggests that some voting process was in place in the early church and that membership could be revoked and restored.

In 1 Corinthians 11 Paul gave instructions for women who wanted to speak in the assembly. His final appeal in this section is that all persons must abide by the practice agreed upon by other “churches of God” (11:16). Not only were various congregations communicating, they were developing practices which were acceptable in the church. In the same chapter Paul spoke about the gathering of the believers as the church. “For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you” (11:18). He proceeded to give instructions on celebrating the Lord’s Supper, a fellowship meal which was begun by the Lord when He celebrated the Passover with His disciples.

Chapters 12-14 contain explicit instructions on the use of spiritual gifts in the assembly. The specificity of the instructions in chapter 14 again indicates that the church met regularly for worship. Paul spoke about the impact of certain gifts when “the whole church assembles together” (14:23). Further, Paul expressed concerns for the impact of tongues on unbelievers who might be present. Paul indicated that several people could participate by using their unique gifts. However, control could be exercised and persons with the wrong attitude could be prohibited from speaking (14:26-35). Paul made an appeal to what was practiced by other churches. He did so with two ironic questions which indicate the arrogance of some persons in Corinth: “Was it from you that the word of God first went forth? Or has it come to you only?” (14:36).

In chapter 16 Paul gave specific directions about the collection for the saints in Jerusalem: “On the first day of every week each one of you is to put aside and save, as he may prosper, so that no collections be made when I come” (16:2). Notice again the meeting was on Sunday and regular giving was anticipated. When Paul arrived he would receive the offering and accompany “whomever you may approve” to take the offering to Jerusalem.

He concluded the letter with affirmation of their leaders and with the instruction that they were to be in subjection to such men (16:16). Finally, Paul conveyed greetings from the churches of Asia and the church meeting in the house of Aquila and Prisca (16:19) to the believers in Corinth.

Even a cursory glance at the other Pauline letters will reveal a similar pattern. Galatians is addressed “to the churches of Galatia” (1:2), which suggest that several churches were linked together for encouragement. It is likely that Ephesians and Colossians were addressed to the churches of pro-Consular Asia, possibly the seven churches mentioned in the book of Revelation. In the various Pauline letters, you will find the mention of identifiable leaders as well as specific instructions which are to be read and obeyed.

In 1 and 2 Timothy, Paul passed the baton of leadership to Timothy. These two letters gave specific instruction about church organization and structure, including such matters as the qualifications for overseers and deacons. He even spoke of the matter of compensation for persons who worked hard at preaching and teaching (1 Tim. 5:17-18). The phrase “double honor” must be understood in terms of financial compensation in the light of the reference to “muzzling the ox” in verse 18. Thus it is obvious that leaders in certain churches were financially compensated for their work in ministry.

In 1 Timothy 5 Paul gave instruction about the ongoing care of the widows. Notice the specificity of the instructions in 5:9: “A widow is to be put on the list only if she is not less than

sixty years old, having been the wife of one man....” The church must have kept a list of approved widows for purposes of benevolence.

Conclusion

The evidence of the New Testament points to an identifiable body of believers who joined themselves together for worship and for mutual encouragement. Their worship included the participation of many gifted persons. They received offerings, commissioned missionaries, received reports, visits, and letters and from various leaders, were expected to abide by the traditions established by the churches, and were called upon to pray and support others in churches like their own.

There can be little question that first century believers were expected to participate fully in a local fellowship of believers which we can, without hesitation, call a church. Paul indicates that the work of the Spirit immerses believers into the life of the body: “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13). When people are truly born again, they will express that new birth by fully identifying with a community of believers as the result of the work of the Spirit in their lives.

The issue is not merely one of membership in a church. The issue is one of a covenant commitment that includes worship, hearing and responding to Gods’ Word, involvement in the mission of the church, and a financial investment in the work of the church. We began this article with a look at the movement called “churchless Christianity.” Perhaps an even greater problem is “token churchianity.” Church membership devoid of commitment has greatly impacted the ability of the local church to have the impact which God desires of His body. Too much is at stake for us to play church!

ⁱ For additional information see F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1960), p. 241 and footnote 26.