

REASONS WHY IF YOU PROFESS TO BE A CHRISTIAN YOU SHOULD COMMIT TO MEMBERSHIP IN A LOCAL CHURCH

Many people view church membership as something that is an option in the Christian life—do it if you like, but it's not required. This is actually typical in a culture in which people more and more want to keep their options open—by keeping commitments to a minimum. Church membership is a commitment, and it seems we must explain the idea. We believe that the Bible teaches that every Christian should be involved in a committed relationship with other Christians, not just personally and individually, or as a matter of general goodwill toward other Christians, but as a member of a particular, local Church—at least under most circumstances. As you read what follows please understand that this is not an argument for membership in Faith Chapel, but for membership *in some particular church*, as a Christian duty. We do not encourage people to make a membership decision and commitment quickly or lightly, and we want to allow time for those who may be considering Faith Chapel. But we urge our regular visitors who are happy to continue worshipping with us to think about this matter seriously.

Paul, speaking of the Church by means of the metaphor of a body, says that God places the members in the Body as He wishes, and that each and every member is needed (1 Cor. 12, especially v. 18). What Paul teaches in this chapter indicates that each of us is needed somewhere, and that we are not like interchangeable parts. Rather, we are needed in particular relationships with other Christians, particular ones; that in itself implies we should not shun a commitment to be involved with these other people. The body metaphor alone, at least by implication, discourages any idea of lone ranger, uncommitted Christians. But there are many more reasons for membership.

JESUS IS LORD—HE IS THE KING TO WHOM EVERY TRUE CHRISTIAN SUBMITS.

From the first chapter of the New Testament Jesus is identified as the heir to David's throne, the bona fide King of Israel, and by the end of that first book, Matthew, we see that His kingship extends over all the earth—and universe (see for instance, the Matthew 1:1; 28:18-20; Acts 2:22-36). There is another kingdom on earth in opposition to that of Jesus—that of the devil (Luk. 4:5-6; Eph. 2:1-4). It has many more subjects at present than the Kingdom of Heaven. As the great Dutch pastor Wilhelmus A Brakel said, "every person upon earth is either a subject of King Jesus or of the devil, the prince of darkness. No matter who you are; individually, you are truly a subject of one of these two kingdoms. You are neither neutral nor a subject of both kingdoms simultaneously." The question for each of us is, "to which kingdom do I belong and submit?" A Christian is someone who truly owns King Jesus as His Lord (1Cor 12:3; Rom 10:9). But if that is your confession, how do you know it is a true confession?

Jesus taught that many would call themselves Christians who are self-deceived about their spiritual condition, thinking themselves saved when they are not (Luk 6:43-46; 13:24-27). The marks of God's saving grace are missing from their lives, and perhaps chief among those tokens of grace is *a growing obedience to Christ*. To be sure, we are saved by grace through faith. Our obedience does not gain our salvation. But salvation means a changed, repentant heart and mind in relation to God's authority over us. Jesus said, "if you love me, you will keep my

commandments” (John 14:15; cf. 1 John 2:3; Rom 1:6). There is no genuine assurance of salvation apart from a growing concern to obey what Jesus commands. The question for us then is whether Jesus (directly or through the apostles) requires church membership. We believe He does. John the apostle even wrote about some people who left the fellowship if the Church that their forsaking the Church was indicative that they never were true Christians (1 John 2:19).

PAUL’S METAPHORS FOR THE CHURCH IMPLY A DUTY OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP.

Paul used several images—metaphors for the Church in the New Testament, all of which imply that the Christian life is not lived out in isolation, but in relationship with other Christians. One we have already mentioned is the body. In a human body the only free and uncommitted cells are cancer cells. All others, even the blood cells that move about, have a “commitment” to function in relation to other parts of the body. Paul also speaks of the church as a commonwealth of which we are citizens, of the church as a family or household of which we are members, and of the church as the temple of the Spirit of God (Ephesians 2:13-22). Can a member, a part of a body survive apart from the rest of the body? It can be frozen or preserved, but not kept alive. Can a stone lying somewhere on the ground claim to be part of a building from which it stays isolated rather than placed in the building? It may be apart and part of the architect’s plan for the building, but it is not a part in reality until put in place. If we are citizens of this country we are also citizens of some state or territory—no one can claim national without also having some local citizenship. These images/metaphors all plainly imply that no Christian should hold himself aloof from and uncommitted to other Christians.

LOVE TOWARD OTHER CHRISTIANS INCLUDES COMMITMENT TO THEM.

The apostle John makes love for the brethren a mark of our conversion, without which no person can claim true assurance of salvation:

The one who says he is in the light and *yet* hates his brother is in the darkness until now. The one who loves his brother abides in the light and there is no cause for stumbling in him. But the one who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes. (1 John 2:9-11)

We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death (1 John 3:14)

But love is something that *always* involves commitment to the person or persons loved. A man who lives and sleeps with a woman whom he refuses to marry does not truly love her. Such a man cannot claim to love the woman he lives with apart from a marriage commitment, which is a covenant. Needless to say, the kind of commitment love requires will vary with the relationship. But the Bible gives substantial evidence that our salvation in Christ brings us into a covenanted relationship, one that requires commitment.

WE ARE BOUND TO LOVE NOT JUST INDIVIDUAL BELIEVERS, BUT THE CHURCH AS THE CHURCH, WHICH IMPLIES COMMITMENT TO IT.

In the Old Testament, there are many texts in which we find one of the authors of Scripture speaking of Jerusalem or Zion, and, as it were, singing the praises of Zion, because Zion is the

place where God has chosen to meet with human beings on (see Psalms 48; 84). One of the psalms says that God holds His gathered people in higher regard than He does the individual believer (Psalm 87:2). There are numerous indicators in the Bible that Israel, Jerusalem and Zion are all pictures of the Church! That is why the psalmist tells us to pray for the peace of Jerusalem (Psalm 122:6), and why Isaiah, looking into the future, tells us never to stop praying for Jerusalem (Isaiah 62:7). The New Testament also speaks of the glory of the Church, as for instance, Paul does in Ephesians (see, especially Eph 2:11-22). And Paul and other NT writers intended that we should love, honor and prize the Church. In 1 Corinthians 11 Paul rebukes the Corinthians for the sin of despising the Church (1 Corinthians 11:22), something for which God was providentially judging some Corinthians (vv 27-30). Scripture also tells us that Christ died for us not just as individuals, but for the Church, and it tells us that He loved the Church (Ephesians 5:25). How can we say that we love and serve Christ if we are indifferent and uncommitted to what is precious to Him? And how can we claim to love the Church, the bride for which Christ shed His precious blood, if we refuse to make a commitment to Her? This idea could be developed at much greater length, but these texts should be enough.

THE COVENANT BOUNDING OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD REQUIRES OUR COMMITMENT NOT JUST TO CHRIST, BUT ALSO TO HIS CHURCH.

We believe that from the time God confronted Adam and Eve after the fall He instituted a covenant with all who would be heirs of salvation. Even if one doubts that the covenant stretches back that far, it is apparent that there is a covenanted relationship between God and His people from the time of Abraham (Gen 15, 17), of which Christians are heirs (Galatians 3, especially v. 29). We are heirs of the covenant, and in a covenanted relationship with Christ.

When you read Genesis 12 and 15, it may appear that God's covenant with Abraham is mainly about *what God promises* regarding salvation. Those promises and God's salvation are infinitely precious and important, and salvation is something God does. But that doesn't mean that within the covenant relationship there are no obligations on us. From the beginning of Genesis 12, and especially in Deuteronomy, we see that the covenant relationship does not and cannot remain intact, unbroken by us, apart from obedience.

This is not merely something that applied to ancient Israel. When Jesus was instituting the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, He said, "this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28). Justification, the forgiveness of sins, is not something that Christ gives anyone apart from this covenant. At the end of Hebrews, it speaks of the same "blood of the eternal covenant" (Hebrews 13:22). This covenant is, of course, the covenant of Grace, but again, obedience is quite central to God's purpose in the covenant. In the marvelous promise in Jeremiah 31, it speaks of both the forgiveness of sin and a new obedience worked in our hearts by the grace of God (Jeremiah 31:31-34). Our relationship with Christ is what the covenant is about, and that relationship, that covenant, summons us to new obedience.

THE COVENANT INCLUDES BOTH RELATIONSHIP TO GOD AND TO OTHERS BELIEVERS.

In Christ, and in the covenant, when we are saved we are brought into a reconciled relationship with God through Christ, and immediately that means relationship with others who are also in the covenant. That is taught all over the Bible, in the details of the Law of Moses, in the prophets, and in the moral teaching of Jesus and the apostles. Love is the summary of what the law requires (Mat 22:37-40; Rom 13:8-10). But we need instruction both in regard to love toward God and love toward man. And as God has so much to say about the particulars of love between fellow believers, we cannot love God and fulfill our duties toward God without loving fellow believers, and that love is just not possible apart from commitment to them.

OUR COVENANT RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD INCLUDES ACCOUNTABILITY TO OTHER CHRISTIANS.

There are numerous other reasons why you should be a member of a local church. One of these is accountability. The Bible plainly tells us that we should be accountable to one another. For instance, in Hebrews 3 the author says,

Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is *still* called "Today," lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. (Hebrews 3:12,13)

The word translated “encourage” can also be translated, “admonish” or “exhort.” But notice, the text also says that the members of the church should together take care to prevent unbelief from springing up within the church. The Greek verb “take care” means literally, “see to it.” It is a second person plural, addressed to all. But how can we take care about someone who has no commitment to us, to listen to us? The non-member is not accountable.

Again, in relation to this idea of accountability, the apostle Paul tells both Timothy and Titus to “command” certain behavior of the people in the church (1 Timothy 1:3; 4:11; 5:7; Titus 1:11; 2:15). Although the verb Paul uses in these instances can be rendered with the less authoritative English “charge” or “exhort,” it still implies that church leaders, elders, have authority to command what the Scriptures require. But someone who refuses church membership is not under the authority of the pastor and church leaders. In another place Scripture speaks yet more directly to this duty of submission to the authority of church leaders:

Obey your leaders, and submit *to them*; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you. (Hebrews 13:17)

Members are supposed to submit to leaders, but leaders will have to answer for their souls to Christ. But without a membership commitment there is no submission to the government of the Church, which has its authority from Christ. In other words, refusing to commit to membership in the Church means that you are exempting yourself from obedience to at least this part of Scripture. It is, of course, sadly true that church leaders can, and many have, abused their authority. But that, in itself, exempts no one from the duty of seeking to be under authority.

THE SACRAMENTS ARE FOR THOSE WHO BELIEVE, AND ARE COMMITTED AND ACCOUNTABLE TO OTHER CHRISTIANS.

Finally, there is a tight connection between the ideas of love, commitment, and acceptance of mutual obligation in relation to the sacraments. That the sacrament of communion is tightly related to the covenant of grace, as mentioned above, is evident in the words in which our Lord established the sacrament:

And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave *it* to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins. (Matthew 26:27-28)

In 1 Corinthians 10 Paul makes an interesting and curious remark. He says,

Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ? Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread. (1 Corinthians 10:16-17)

The symbolism of the Lord's Supper is rich. We know it includes a remembrance of Christ dying for us, and the meal is an indication that God accepts Christ's sacrifice on our behalf. But here in 1 Corinthians 10 Paul finds another element of symbolism. The single loaf of bread represents the body of Christ—not just his literal human body dying on the cross, but the Church as the body of Christ. We may well ask, then, how can someone who refuses to commit to the people sitting all around him or her in the worship service claim, with Paul, that he or she is still "one body" with them? One should consider these things well. Given that Paul wrote by inspiration, if this symbolism is from God and we ignore it, we are sure to be taking the Name of the Lord in vain, and God promises to remember this (Exod 20:7). Further, in the very next chapter of his letter, Paul taught that God's judgment was falling on Christians who were taking the other Christians lightly with whom they were partaking of the sacrament. These are sobering things, of course, but do they not follow from what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10?

CONCLUSION

In concluding, we should say that we understand that many people have probably never heard or thought about these things before now. But now that you have read them, you can no longer say you had never heard. You should weigh carefully what you have just read. Our examination of the Scriptures leads us to believe that Christ does require each and every one of us who confess Him as Lord to be a member of and under authority in some church. We also recognize that there may legitimately be circumstances that can prevent someone from joining a church. For instance, one such thing would be a situation of temporary residence. Another would be the situation of someone for whom to join the church in which he wants to worship would involve obligating himself to do some thing or several things that would violate his conscience, whereas merely attending services there does not. But these are exceptional situations and not the rule. If one or the other of these should be the case with you in relation to Faith Chapel we ask you that you let us know. On the other hand, if you are a regular visitor, not a member of another evangelical church to which you eventually will return, and you want to continue worshipping with us, we urge you to consider whether it is pleasing to Christ for you to go on avoiding a membership commitment. We end by asking you to consider this: Christ has so committed Himself to us that He undertook to fulfill the Covenant on both sides, sealed the covenant with an oath in the Old Testament, and with His blood in the New. How can we refuse commitment to Him and His bride in light of that? Thank you and God bless.