

The Church Of The New Testament (Part 8 of 8)

April 2, 2009

What Membership in the Church Means

For the past few weeks, I have been speaking about the church that Jesus promised to build. Jesus said in Matthew 16:18, "Upon this rock I will build my church." From time to time, I have shown that the church which Jesus promised to build was established on the first Pentecost day after Jesus' resurrection, and how all of those who were saved through their obedience to the gospel were added to the church by the Lord. I believe that since that time all of those who have done the same things those people did on the day of Pentecost have been added to the same church. But, today I want to raise the question, "What does membership in the church of Christ mean?"

To be a member of the church of the Lord means to be a member of the body of which he is the head. The apostle Paul said: "For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit." In verse 20, he said: "But now are they many members, yet but one body." In verse 27, he said: "Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular." In Ephesians 1: 22, 23, the apostle Paul identified the body as the church. He said: "And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all."

To be a member of the church means to be a worker in the vineyard of the Lord. The Savior taught: "For the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which went out early in the morning to hire laborers into his vineyard" (Matthew 20:1). If you are a member of the church, you are to be a laborer, or worker in his vineyard.

To be a member of the church is also to be a stone in the spiritual temple of God. The apostle Peter said, "Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5).

To be a member of the church means to be married to Christ, for Paul told his brethren they were "dead to the law . . . that ye should be married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead" (Romans 7:4). It means to be a citizen in Christ's kingdom, according to Colossians 1: 12; 13, and a child in God's family, Galatians 3:26, 27.

To be a member of the church of the New Testament means the enjoyment of many rich spiritual blessings. (1) We have a father who watches over us. 1 Peter 3: 12, "For the eyes of the Lord are over the

righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers, but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil." (2) The Father has promised to supply our every need. Matthew 6:33, "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto YOU." (3) Sometimes it means fatherly correction and chastisement, according to Hebrews 12:5-13. (4) It means that we have a right, as children of God, and members of God's family, to appeal to God as a father. Jesus taught: "After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven . . . " (Matthew 6:9). It means that we have fellowship with the saints, according to Philippians 2:1-4. (5) It means that we have fellowship with the saints, according to Philippians 2:1-4. (6) It means that we have a hope of an eternal inheritance. Peter promised that we have "an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you" (1 Peter 1:4).

To be a member of the church or the body of Christ means that we have been called to live a life of holiness, sanctification, and justification. Paul described a number of gross sins and said: "And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:11). The apostle Paul also said to the Corinthians that they were "called to be saints" (1 Corinthians 1:2). Thus, they were not merely candidates for sainthood, but they were called to be saints. He said that the Christian life is a "holy calling" (Ephesians 4: 1), and that all who "name the name of Christ" are to "depart from iniquity" (2 Timothy 2:19).

Membership in the Lord's church also involves responsibilities. Since membership involves the highest and holiest privileges, it also involves some great and serious responsibilities. The idea that some seem to have, that is, that they will let others do all of the work of evangelism, benevolence, and edification, and that they will let others work to build up God's kingdom here, and then that they will share in the rewards at the end of the way, is an idea that is foreign and unknown to the Scriptures. We have a duty and a responsibility.

The only unit of organization known in the New Testament for carrying forth the work of the church is the local congregation. Therefore, it follows that in order for a Christian to be in full fellowship with the church, he must be associated with, be a part of, and answerable to a local congregation of the church. There is no such principle in the New Testament as a person saying: "Well, I have obeyed the gospel and I have been added to the church, and there is nothing more for me to do. I will let someone else worry about building up the local congregation." There is no such thing in the New Testament described by some as "membership at large" in the church of God. Paul always in his work associated himself with a congregation of Christians, as we could abundantly show by the Scriptures. My friend, if you are pleasing to God you will not only have obeyed the gospel, but you will be a working member of a local

congregation that can be identified as a faithful church of Christ. That means then that you will do these things:

(1) You will submit yourself to the elders of a local congregation, or its duly appointed leaders, for Hebrews 13:17 says, "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you." A person who is a "member-at-large," or thinks that he is cannot obey this scripture.

(2) You will also have fellowship or participation in the work of the local congregation. Paul taught: "Put them in mind to be subject to principalities, and powers, to obey magistrates, to be ready to every good work" (Tit. 3:1, 2). Jesus said that a tree is known by its fruit, (Luke 6:44).

(3) You will do your best to preserve the peace, unity and harmony of the body. The apostle Paul besought the Corinthians that there be "no divisions among you" (I Corinthians 1:10). He commanded that there be "no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another" (1 Corinthians 12:25). He warned the Romans to avoid "them which cause divisions and of fences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned" (Romans 16:17). He told the Ephesians to endeavor, that is, make some definite effort, "to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:1-3).

(4) As a member of the church, you will attempt to preserve and maintain the purity of the church. Remember, Christ died to establish the purity of the church, for Paul said: "Christ . . . loved the church, and gave himself for it . . . that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish" (Ephesians 5:25-27). Paul also called upon members of the church to maintain the purity of the church, 2 Timothy 2:19, "Let everyone that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity." Also, 2 Timothy 2:22, "Flee also youthful lusts: but follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart." And, 1 Timothy 5:22, "Keep thyself pure."

(5) Finally, as a member of the church, you will seek to bear fruit. Jesus taught the essentiality of being, and abiding in the true vine (John 15:6, 7). But he also taught that those branches on the true vine, i.e., disciples, which do not bear fruit, will be cut off, and cast into the fire, (John 15:6). He said that the proof of discipleship is fruit bearing, (John 15:8). Fruit bearing means saving other souls, and reaching the lost.

What about church membership? Is it absolutely necessary? Remember that God does the saving. Salvation is simply the forgiveness of God, or the blotting out of our sins. So, the church does not do the saving. But the question is, "Can one enjoy the salvation that God has provided without being in the church that Jesus built?" To answer that question, let us consider this:

(1) Jesus thought the church was important. He purchased it with his own

precious blood, (Acts 20:28). He gave himself for the church, (Ephesians 5:25). Paul said: "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5). If we have the mind of Christ toward the church, how will we regard it?

(2) One cannot be "in Christ" without being "in the church." As we have already shown, Christ is the head, the church is his body, and every Christian is a member. Now one cannot be joined to the head without being a member of the body, which is the church. Also, Christ is the king, the church is his kingdom, (1 Timothy 6:15). One cannot be a subject of the king without being a citizen of his kingdom. But, again, Christ is the bridegroom, and the church is his bride, (Ephesians 5:23-32). The two are one, true to the analogy of a husband and wife. One cannot be related to Christ, therefore, without being equally related to the church. A child belongs by the same birth to both the families of his father and mother. To be in Christ is to be in his body, which is the church.

(3) All spiritual blessings are in Christ Jesus, (Ephesians 1:3); therefore, one must be in Christ to have access to those blessings.

(4) To be a member of the church of Christ means to have your name enrolled in heaven, (Hebrews 12:22, 23). To not have your name enrolled in heaven means to be eternally lost at the judgment, (Revelation 20:15).

(5) The same process and conditions that save from sin, make one a Christian and add him to the church. What conditions save from sin? Please note: (a) Faith and baptism brings salvation, (Mark 16:15, 16). (b) Faith and baptism puts one into Christ, (Galatians 3:27). (c) Faith and baptism adds one to the church, (Acts 2:41). Therefore, the same thing that causes one to be saved causes the Lord to add him to the church. There is no such thing taught in the New Testament as being saved by one process and then joining the church of your choice by another process.

How do we become members of the church? Here I am not talking about joining denominations built by men, but I am asking: How do we become members of the church that we read about in the Bible?

Consider first the testimony of Christ. Jesus taught: "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). Jesus also taught: "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3). Jesus gave the terms of salvation in what is called "the great commission." He said that the apostles should go and teach or preach the gospel to every creature, living in all nations; that those who were thus taught should believe, repent and be baptized, to be saved or for the remission of sins, Mark 16:15,16; Matthew 28:18-20; Luke 24:44-49.

Consider also the testimony of the apostles. They taught that we are saved "by the foolishness of preaching, (1 Corinthians 1:21). They taught that "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17). They taught that "without faith it is impossible to please

him" (Hebrews 11:6); that one must "repent . . . and be converted" (Acts 3:19); that one must confess Christ before men in order to be confessed before the Father in heaven, (Matthew 10:32); and that by faith one must be baptized into Christ, (Galatians 3:26, 27).

The way to become members of the church is also taught by figures. We are said to be "born again," that is, "of water and of the Spirit" (John 3:3-5). We are said to be "born again," that is, begotten of "incorruptible seed," which is the word of God, (1 Peter 1:23). We understand that we did not become members of our natural family the moment we were begotten or conceived, but rather when we were born. In the same way, we are conceived or begotten by the word of God, and when this results in obedience to the Lord in baptism, we are then born of water and of the Spirit, (John 3:5).

We are also said to be married to Christ, (Ephesians 5:23-30; Romans 7:4). In any marriage, there is first an acquaintanceship, followed by love and finally a ceremony. It is no different spiritually. We become acquainted with Christ when drawn by the gospel. Jesus said, "Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me" (John 6:44, 45). This acquaintanceship is followed by love. John said: "We love him, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). The ceremony that unites us with Christ is mentioned by Paul: "For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Galatians 3:27).

Finally, the way we become members of the church is exemplified by the cases conversion in the Acts of the Apostles. (1) In the case of the Pentecostians in Acts 2, they first heard the gospel as preached by Peter, that is that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and arose, (Acts 2:22-34). They were then told to do something, as believers, for Peter said: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins" (Acts 2:38). They obeyed. "Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:41). According to Acts 2:38, 47, the Pentecostians received at baptism, the remission of sins, the gift of the Holy Ghost, and were added to the church.

(2) The way to become members of the church is also exemplified by the Samaritans. The record says: "But when they believed Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women" (Acts 8:12).

(3) Finally, the way to become members of the church is exemplified by the Corinthians. The Bible says: "And many of the Corinthians hearing believed, and were baptized" (Acts 18:8). In fact, every conversion in the book of Acts is but a repetition of this same story. The plan was to hear, believe, repent, confess faith in Christ, and be baptized into Christ.

When men obey the will of God, their sins are pardoned and God recognizes them and accepts them as saved, and they enjoy the privileges and responsibilities of that relationship. There is no such thing

taught in God's word as being saved by one process and joining the church by another.

Can you claim membership in the church of the New Testament? Have you obeyed the gospel and been added to the church? Are you living a faithful, Christian life? If so, go on your way rejoicing. If not, perhaps you would like to do so while time and opportunity affords you the privilege.

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