

Membership: Necessary or Optional?

By Marvin Hawbaker

WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

When Jesus said “I will build my church”, what did He mean? What is a church? What does the term “ecclesia” mean? What did He mean by “building” the church? And does it really matter?

It does matter and the Bible has the answers. In fact, it is vitally important to have the right understanding of the Biblical concept of the church, since that will determine how a Christian will serve the Lord. Doctrine defines duty and duty directs deeds. In other words, what we believe determines what we do and how we act.

A local assembly of people

Jesus used the Greek word “ecclesia” when He said that He would build His church. Ecclesia was a common word in the Greek society of Jesus’ time. It meant an assembly or group of people called out for a specific purpose. It was used for town meetings or other similar gatherings. Therefore, the word “church” does not refer to a building. A church is not a denomination, nor is it a reference to all Christians in a universal sense. With possible rare exception, the New Testament uses the term church to refer to an assembly of Christians in a specific location. Paul wrote to the church in the city of Corinth (I Corinthians 1:2), the church in the city of Thessalonica (I Thessalonians 1:1), and the churches in the region of Galatia (Galatians 1:2). Reference is also made to the church at Ephesus (Acts 20:17) and the church at Antioch (Acts 13:1), as well as many others. The point is that there were assemblies in many different cities and areas, each of which constituted an individual, independent, autonomous church in that place.

An assembly of believers

Paul characterized the members of the church at Corinth as those who were sanctified in Christ Jesus and called saints (I Corinthians 1:2). On the Day of Pentecost following Christ’s ascension into Heaven, about 3,000 people were added to the church at Jerusalem. It is significant that those who were added were those who heard Peter’s message, repented of their sin and trusted Jesus Christ as their Savior (Acts 2:41). But they were not added until one other requirement was fulfilled.

An assembly of baptized believers

The second qualification for membership is also seen in Acts 2:41. Those who gladly received Peter’s instruction to repent were baptized. Scriptural baptism, as taught in the New Testament, is baptism of **believers** by **immersion**, for the purpose of a **public testimony** of salvation and as an **act of obedience** to God. It is important to realize that not all that is called baptism is Scriptural baptism and if it is not Scriptural baptism it is not baptism at all in the eyes of God. (For a more thorough treatment of the subject of baptism, see the brochure “What Does The Bible Say About Baptism?”.)

An organized body to serve Christ

Paul characterized the church at Corinth as a body of Christ. “Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it” (I Corinthians 12:27 NASB). A church is not a disjointed group of people, nor an informal social gathering. It is a unified body. There is organization and purpose. In fact, Paul chastened the Corinthian church for disorganization and divisions. He instructed them to do all things properly and in an orderly manner, reminding them that God is not the author of confusion (I Corinthians 14:33,40). Using the illustration of the human body, Paul explains in I Corinthians 12:12-27 that each local church is one body of Christ that has many members. Each member has a specific job to do in the same way that the foot, hand and ear have specific responsibilities to the human body. When each individual member is fulfilling his or her specific function, the body is healthy and effective.

A New Testament church, then, is ***a local assembly of baptized believers organized to serve Christ***. A church is a group of individuals voluntarily bound together by a common salvation, a common baptism and a common purpose and desire to serve the Lord Jesus Christ on this earth. When Jesus said that He would build His church, He meant that He was instituting this kind of an organization that would multiply and reproduce until He returned to earth again. As a matter of obedience to God, every Christian should be a member of a Scriptural church and should be actively involved, not only by attending, but also by using his or her gifts, talents and abilities in service for Christ.

WHY IS THE CHURCH IMPORTANT?

The church was important to the Apostle Paul. He invested all of his Christian life in churches. He founded churches. He cared for and nurtured them. He prayed for them. He wrote to them. He exhorted them, rebuked them, admonished them and loved them. His heart for them is revealed in his statement “. . .*there is the daily pressure upon me of concern for all the churches*” (II Corinthians 11:28 NASB). Certainly the church was important to Paul. What else does the Bible say about the importance of the church?

The church was important to Christ

Christ established the first church in Jerusalem during His earthly ministry. Jesus said “*I will build my church*” and then proceeded to do just that. He built it upon the foundation of Himself—upon this rock. The disciples, later called apostles, were the first to be added to the church. When Christ ascended to His Father, He had already given the Great Commission to a flourishing group of approximately 120 disciples who were meeting together for prayer, worship and preaching. As they carried on the work that Christ commanded them to do, the church began to grow rapidly. Three thousand were added on the Day of Pentecost and thousands more later. The church at Jerusalem then began to experience great persecution. As a result of this persecution, believers were scattered and went everywhere preaching the Word and local churches were established in many other areas. But Christ made it clear that the church which He established upon Himself would continue perpetually when He promised that the gates of hell would not prevail against it and that His presence would continually be with the church until the end of the age.

Not only did Christ establish the church, but He loved it so much that He shed His own blood and died for it. It seems impossible to read the words of Ephesians 5:25-27 and remain unconvinced of the vital importance of the church to Christ. “. . .*Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, 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.” If the church was that important to Christ, should it not be important to the Christian?

The church meets the need of the Christian

The book of Hebrews was written to Jews who were being persecuted for their faith in Christ. Some of them had become discouraged and had quit assembling with their church for worship and encouragement. Others were thinking about doing the same. God's message to them was *“Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering. . . And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching”* (Hebrews 10:23-25). In other words, “don't quit!”. Meeting together as a church on a regular basis is a Christian duty commanded by God, two benefits of which are spiritual edification from the teaching of the Word of God and encouragement and strength drawn from one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. In fact, God's Word says that we should meet together even more faithfully as we see the return of Christ drawing nearer. It seems ironic that the easiest time to quit attending church and serving the Lord is when we are discouraged. In reality, that is when we need even more the edification, encouragement and support of the church. We must constantly be alert to the spiritual battle with the flesh and the devil that would seek to discourage us and then to remove a major source of spiritual strength by deceiving us into forsaking our church assembly. That is equivalent to a starving man refusing to eat food, thereby avoiding the very thing that would meet his need.

The church carries out God's work here on earth

God has always had a place and a method to accomplish His work. In Old Testament times He had the Tabernacle, then the Temple. In New Testament times, God is working through His churches. *“Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end”* (Ephesians 3:21). The church is the institution commissioned to make disciples through the preaching of the Gospel. No other institution has that commission. The church is commissioned to baptize disciples by the authority of Christ. The church is commissioned to teach disciples and train them. God has given pastors and teachers to the church *“for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fulness of Christ”* (Ephesians 4:12,13 NASB). The church is important because it has a reason to exist. It has a job to do, given by the Lord Himself! (Matthew 28:19,20)

Since the church is God's means for God's work to be accomplished, God has ordained that it be the priority for a Christian's financial giving. In the Old Testament, offerings were brought to the place of worship. In the New Testament, Christians are instructed to give sacrificially, cheerfully, liberally and in proportion to how God has given to them. Paul instructed that these offerings also be brought to the place of worship on the first day of the week (I Corinthians 16:2). God's plan for His work to be carried on is through the freewill offerings of His people.

The church is the place where the Christian glorifies God

The duty of a Christian is to glorify God. (I Corinthians 6:19-20). To glorify God is to make God look good in the eyes of others. It is calling attention to God's attributes and giving Him full credit and all praise for who He is and all He does. If our duty as Christians is to glorify

God, the next question is how and where are we to do that? The answer is found in Ephesians 3:21, “*Unto him be glory in the church. . .*” This sheds some interesting light on the importance of the church. Since our duty to God is to glorify Him, and the place where He receives glory is the church, active involvement in the church is a necessary part of fulfilling our duty to God. The church is important!

The church will stand the test of time

Everyone likes to be a part of endeavors that are successful. We want to put our money in a bank that is successful, lest we lose our money. We want to deal with businesses that are successful in their line of business. Every Christian has the opportunity to be a part of an institution that God has assured us will be successful, not in the eyes of the world, but in His eyes. Ephesians 3:21 says that God will receive glory in the church “*throughout all ages, world without end.*” Our Lord promised that the gates of hell would not destroy the church (Matthew 16:18). Christ promised that He would be with the church perpetually, “. . .*even unto the end of the world*” (Matthew 28:20). The success of the church does not depend upon a human leader, but rather upon a Divine Head, since God has exalted Christ “. . .*to be head over all things to the church*” (Ephesians 1:21). The success of the church is guaranteed by Christ's promise that He would build His church. The fulfillment of that promise is seen in that God continues to save sinners and add them to the church just as He began to do in Jerusalem nearly 2000 years ago. Is the church important? Yes! So important that God has guaranteed its success!

Why is the church important? Christ died for the church. The Christian's spiritual welfare depends upon it. God has ordained the church to do His work on this earth and has guaranteed its success. The Christian glorifies God through the church. The church is a vital part of every Christian's existence and activity on this earth, simply because that is the truth of the Bible. We cannot trust current opinion or personal feelings. We must believe God.

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

There once was a family who had a house that they called home, but seldom was anyone there. A couple of the family members tried to stop by the house once a week unless they had something else to do. Others came by when they could, but it was not often. Never were all of the members of the family there at the same time. They did not work together or participate in activities with each other. Two of the members contributed to the financial support of the family on a regular basis. The rest contributed when they had a little cash to spare. One member suggested disbanding the family and selling the house but all of the others opposed the idea. They said it felt good just knowing that the house was there.

Although the family mentioned above is fictitious, you were probably saying something like, “This isn't a family!”, as you read the story. “Families live together, work together, play together, help each other, meet one another's needs and support each other.” Yet that story illustrates the attitude of many Christians toward the extended family of the church. I believe there is a great need to understand God's intention for the church and what it means to be a “member” of a church.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus, primarily to instruct them as to the function and operation of God's family, the church.¹ In Ephesians 4:11-16 we find a philosophy of church ministry in a nutshell. God has given the church pastors and teachers whose job it is to

¹ Ephesians 3:1-12

prepare Christians for serving in ministry. As those who are prepared minister to one another, the body of Christ is built up. Unity, knowledge and spiritual maturity begin to develop. There is discernment of truth and a communication of that truth in love. In short, there is partnership and participation that contributes to the perpetual progress and growth of the body as each member of the body contributes his or her unique ability.

A definite organization, accountability and discipline is seen in this description of the function of the church. The rest of New Testament teaching and example regarding the church bears this out as well. However, while there is clearly the example of organization, Scripture gives little information in regard to the organization process. The implication is that there is considerable freedom for a church to design its own membership procedures and requirements according to preference, expediency and wisdom. However, it seems reasonable to assume that the procedures and requirements must be designed to assist the church in obeying the mandates and principles of Scripture concerning a church body while respecting individual Christian liberty wherever possible.

THE CONCEPT OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Scripture is clear as to the essential qualities of a church. For example, the church is to be composed of believers.² It is to be unified in its purpose and function.³ Members are to love one another.⁴ The church is to be pure.⁵ There is to be accountability⁶ and loving discipline for the purpose of restoration to fellowship.⁷ The church is to be striving together in cooperation and partnership.⁸ It is to have a good testimony among those of the world.⁹ It is to be a community of people who labor together.¹⁰ It is to be a joyful church.¹¹

It seems obvious from this brief overview of Scripture that whatever it means to be a part of a church, it is not simply ritual, formality or social status. It is not just having one's name on a list. Neither is it the convenience of having the church there just in case it is needed. It also seems clear that if people are added to¹² and removed from¹³ the church, there must be some type of procedure or guidelines for doing that.

Membership is best seen as a voluntary commitment on the part of a believer to partnership and participation in the work of the Lord through an assembly of baptized believers organized to serve Christ. Each local church, as an autonomous body, should develop membership guidelines and requirements that will enable it to carry out the commands of the Scriptures to the best of its understanding. When viewed in this way, membership in a church carries with it both benefits and responsibilities.

BENEFITS OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

- *Obedience*

² Acts 2:41; 1 Corinthians 1:2

³ Romans 15:5-6; 2 Corinthians 13:11; Philippians 1:27; 2:2; 1 Peter 3:8

⁴ 1 Thessalonians 4:9

⁵ Ephesians 5:27

⁶ Hebrews 10:23-25

⁷ 1 Corinthians 5:1-13

⁸ Philippians 1:27

⁹ 1 Thessalonians 4:12; 1 Timothy 3:7

¹⁰ 1 Thessalonians 1:3-8

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 8:2

¹² Acts 2:47

¹³ 1 Corinthians 5:13

The responsibilities of attending, serving, giving and submitting are commands of the Word for every Christian. God warns that we should not forsake assembling together as believers. In fact, we should be even more diligent in our faithfulness as we see the day of Christ's return drawing nearer.¹⁴

- ***Growth***

The early Christians, following their salvation and baptism, continued faithfully in the apostle's teaching.¹⁵ Pastors and teachers are to prepare the saints for ministry so that the church will be edified, or built up.¹⁶ The church is a vital part of a Christian's growth toward maturity and increased usefulness in service.

- ***Encouragement***

Perhaps you've experienced it in marriage. There are days when you are "down". But those same days seem to be the ones in which your spouse is "up" and their encouraging optimism carries you along. On other days the roles are reversed and you encourage them. The same thing takes place in close friendships. But if you're out there alone, it's tough.

As believers, we are up against a constant spiritual battle.¹⁷ If we attempt to wage that spiritual warfare on our own, we will be easily discouraged and eventually defeated. We need that encouragement—that "strength in numbers"—of a body of people who believe the same and have the same commitment as do we to win over Satan and serve the Lord faithfully. As we meet together faithfully, we are to be encouraging one another.¹⁸

- ***Accountability***

When driving along a treacherous mountain road, we are thankful for guardrails. The rail is a barrier between us and the several hundred foot drop to the rocks below. It protects us from going over the edge in the case of a mishap. We should also be thankful for the "guardrail" of accountability to other believers in the local church which keeps us from going over the edge and crashing on the rocks of sin. Through active participation in the body of believers our lives are open to the observation of others, which is as God intended. There is "positive peer pressure" to do what is right. As the writer of Hebrews put it ". . . let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds".¹⁹ Our right life will likewise be positive peer pressure in the lives of others. The Bible is clear that it does make a difference what others think about our lives, as well as the kind of example we set.

- ***Opportunity***

Think of it! Jesus said, "I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" and then gave us the opportunity to be part of that church. Yet, many Christians miss the opportunity to be involved in God's eternal work by considering the church insignificant or unnecessary. Someone has said:

¹⁴ Hebrews 10:25

¹⁵ Acts 2:41-42

¹⁶ Ephesians 4:12

¹⁷ Ephesians 6:10-13

¹⁸ Hebrews 10:25

¹⁹ Hebrews 10:24 (NIV)

“Only one life—’twill soon be past,
Only what’s done for Christ will last.”

The church is God’s means for accomplishing His work in this world today. The church is where Christ receives glory until the end of this age when He returns for His own.²⁰ The church is where God’s power is exhibited through His people. To ignore the church is to miss what Christ is doing in this sinful world as He builds His church through His people. This life will soon be past and the opportunity gone. Seize the opportunity now!

RESPONSIBILITIES OF MEMBERSHIP

Have you ever heard the comment, “The church is just not meeting my needs”? Certainly every true church must strive to maintain effectiveness and relevance in its ministry. We must be sensitive to the leadership of the Holy Spirit and the needs of people. But too often, it seems, this comment reflects a misunderstanding of the purpose of the church. More deeply, it reflects a misunderstanding of God’s principles of giving, receiving and serving others. Some expect that the church is an Artesian well to which they can continually come and drink without ever giving back. There is an old adage that says, “I slept and dreamed that life was beauty; I awoke and found that life was duty”. To be sure, there are benefits that accrue from church membership. But those benefits are found as we faithfully fulfill our responsibilities. In giving we receive. In meeting the needs of others we find our own needs met.

The attitude that the church exists only to give to our needs is one which leads to a complaining, dissatisfied and critical spirit. It is a self-centered and selfish attitude. Believers are to be “one-another minded”, seeking to serve the needs of others. That is true Biblical love. As we seek to serve with that attitude, we will find satisfaction and fulfillment. We will also find that our own needs are met in the course of fulfilling our duty and our hearts will be filled with gratitude and thanksgiving to God, from whom comes every good and perfect gift.

The responsibilities of church membership are very closely related to the benefits of membership, reflecting the reciprocal relationship between benefits and duties. These responsibilities include:

- ***Attending***

The early Christians met together frequently for worship, edification and fellowship.²¹ The most basic of membership responsibilities involves faithfully assembling together with the church, thus obeying God’s command not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together.²² This command is tied directly to encouragement and accountability, which, of course, stands to reason. It is impossible to encourage people who are never seen, or establish accountability among people who are never together. It is also tied directly to unity since people cannot be of one mind unless they communicate and interact.

It is amazing how many professing Christians apparently believe that church membership means nothing more than having their name added to a list of members. Furthermore, they believe their name ought to remain on that list whether or not they attend; whether or not they are involved; whether or not they even know any of the other members. Some are offended when their name is removed from the membership list of a church that they do

²⁰ Ephesians 3:20-21

²¹ Acts 1:14; 2:42,46-47; 5:42

²² Hebrews 10:25

not attend. However, the church is not simply a list of names. It is a living body of people. The church is a community of believers who are committed to serving the Lord together. Therefore, a church's membership list should reflect those who are currently committed to the church as demonstrated by their faithful involvement and participation. Anything else renders the concept of membership meaningless.

At Calvary, a membership list is published and made available in the literature racks in the foyer of the auditorium. The list is updated each time there is a change in the membership. Those who serve in ministry capacities must be members of Calvary. Those who do not attend for a period of six months are removed from the membership (except for those with physical problems or other circumstances which are beyond their personal control). Before they are removed, however, they have been encouraged many times and, often, by many different people, to be faithful in their commitment to the Lord through the church. And even after they are removed, the hope is that they will realize the importance of the church and become faithful again so that their membership can be reinstated. Since the membership list is constantly maintained in this way, it is an accurate reflection at any given time of those who are committed to, and involved in, the ministry of Calvary Church.

- ***Serving***

True freedom is the freedom to serve one another.²³ The church was given the commission to proclaim the gospel to the unsaved world. We serve the unsaved by participating in progress of the gospel. Meeting the physical needs of the unsaved could be one way of "building a bridge" to them in order to gain a hearing for the gospel. We serve believers by meeting the needs which become evident to us as we relate to one another in the church. Whatever gift we have been given by God, we are to use it in serving one another.²⁴ One of the functions of the church is to equip believers to effectively and appropriately use their gift in serving others so that the body of Christ will be built up in unity, faith, and knowledge, resulting in the progressive maturity of the body.²⁵

- ***Giving***

Ministering to people, whether believers or unbelievers, requires money. The church may give financial aid to believers in need, like the offering the Corinthians took for the saints in need at Jerusalem.²⁶ The church may choose to support the needs of a pastor or other servant in order that he will be able to devote full time to the ministry.²⁷ The church participates in the progress of the gospel in other parts of the world through the support of missionary ministries. There is the cost of maintenance, insurance and utilities for the building in which we meet. Other costs of ministry include literature and supplies for Sunday School and AWANA Clubs and other teaching ministries of the church, maintenance of office equipment, postage, gasoline and maintenance for the vans and many other miscellaneous expenses.

God's method for the support of His work is the freewill giving of His people. Believers are to evaluate their giving through prayer and the leadership of the Holy Spirit and make a

²³ Galatians 5:13-15

²⁴ 1 Peter 4:10-11

²⁵ Ephesians 4:7,11-13

²⁶ 2 Corinthians 8 & 9

²⁷ 1 Corinthians 9:3-14

conscious decision regarding the amount.²⁸ While no specific amount is given in the New Testament, there are principles given. For example, our giving is to be sacrificial, liberal and generous.²⁹ It is to be regular and consistent.³⁰ It is to be given cheerfully and willingly.³¹ It serves as a proof of the sincerity of our love for Christ.³² As all of God's people participate cheerfully and generously to the support of God's work, the needs of His work will be met abundantly.

- ***Submitting***

Accountability is a two-way street. Accountability requires submission. When others are held accountable, they submit to us. When they hold us accountable, we submit to them. God commands that we submit to one another out of reverence for Him.³³

Believers also are instructed to submit to the rulers or leaders of the church.³⁴ These leaders are given the responsibility by God of watching over the "souls" of those whom God has committed to their trust. As believers submit to leaders who meet the Biblical qualifications for leadership, the leaders are enabled to fulfill their responsibilities with joy. In addition, God says it is "profitable," or beneficial, for those who submit, as well.

© Calvary Church

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that you do not alter the wording in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be approved by Calvary Church.

²⁸ 2 Corinthians 9:7

²⁹ 2 Corinthians 8:1-2

³⁰ 1 Corinthians 16:2

³¹ 2 Corinthians 9:7

³² 2 Corinthians 8:8

³³ Ephesians 5:21

³⁴ Hebrews 13:17