

Church Membership

Written by K B Napier
Monday, 18 January 2010 13:59

What is church 'membership'? Is it scriptural? Is it valid? Every local church has its 'members' and every denomination has its 'member' churches. What does this membership really mean?

Normally, a person has to comply with certain conditions before he can take communion, for example. He must usually be a 'member'. The process of becoming a member can be very different, depending on denomination, locality, country, culture etc. It may require a letter of commendation from a former pastor or, proof that he is baptised. Other churches will ask for a brief interview: in my own interview (by a deacon, I may add - not by the pastor!) in one church I simply had a chat! The interviewer was almost apologetic and said that the rules demanded an interview... but he never even mentioned my Christian status - was I saved, or not?

Sometimes a pastor will have a kindly chat; sometimes his deacons; sometimes it is put to the vote of the whole church or of the diaconate. The idea, rarely upheld, is that some can be barred from 'membership' whilst others may be 'welcomed into the church'. What does it mean to be a member? Well, the main 'advantage' (??) seems to be that you can then have 'voting rights' and you can stay at special 'business' meetings. In reality, outsiders know exactly what has gone on in a special members-only meeting by the same evening - and many more know by the next day! So what's the point of it all?

As for 'voting rights'... vote for what? To appoint a new pastor or deacon? No membership may vote-in a new pastor. Only the Lord can do that (see articles on pastorship). It is dubious if deacons can be elected, either. What else is there to vote for requiring such secrecy? Whether or not to spend money on installing new central heating? Who to send a donation to? Hardly worth the effort of secrecy, is it!

It has been said that membership is more for 'eventualities' than for everyday use. By this is meant, the right of a local church to get rid of someone it does not like. Thus, if there is a rule which allows a person to be thrown out, then it is there to be used.

Is membership valid? No, it is not. Can a person be asked to leave the church if he does not attend prayer meetings regularly? Can he be barred from taking communion if he has missed more than three consecutive Sundays? According to some, this can be done. Yet, even if we look very hard in scripture, we do not find justification for membership or for the rules applied to it by local churches.

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Where does membership come from? That's easy to answer: it comes from the human need to interfere with what God has provided! A local church building is merely a place where a large number of people can meet without crushing each other. The people who meet together inside the building should all be Believers if the place is called a Christian church. (Sadly, virtually all local churches are a mixture of saved and unsaved people... even unsaved people may become members, whilst true Christians can be thrown out, or forced to leave).

The Church of Jesus Christ can be defined as all who have been saved, are saved and who will ever be saved. That is the only qualification to be a member of the universal Church, whose Head is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. He did not ask for a vote or for a letter. He knew, from before the world was formed, exactly who would be saved and when. He knows exactly where they are at any given time and He knows exactly what local church they are visiting. He places no membership conditions on the saved person. This is because once a man is saved, he can never be lost, no matter what he may do in the future to offend others.

Therefore, no local church has the right to impose rules on fellow Believers which have not been instigated by Jesus Christ. Does that mean we may do as we please and a local church does not have the right to throw us out? No, it does not.

A local pastor has a certain authority, delegated to him by the Lord. The local church as a whole also has limited authority, in certain instances. Every church must apply discipline. This is not confined to throwing people out of a church... discipline is concerned with much more than that. Discipline involves everyday living as well as Bible study, prayer and other aspects of living as Christians. The Bible tells us things we must do, so that we grow as Believers. It tells us what to do if things go wrong. It also tells us what kind of things constitute a serious offence and how we must be very careful if we are to apply the extreme act of casting-out from fellowship. But nowhere does it tell us we must have local church membership!

All Believers are members of each other. If I walk into a local church in outer Mongolia, I am automatically a member. There are no physical barriers to my membership, because none are set by the Head of the Church, Jesus Christ. He provides the Church with sufficient 'rules'... we do not need to apply even more of them. If folks wish to move to another local church, well, there is nothing much we can do about it. If they wish not to meet for a few weeks, that is up to them. If they do not have communion for a while, it is their loss, not ours. Yes, we may enquire to see if there are problems... but we do not have the authority to cancel their 'membership'.

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Certain things (including prayer or preaching meetings) may go on inside a local church building, but none of them is mandatory. We do not even have to preach on a Sunday! If we wish, we can just sit around and talk, or have a cup of tea. Not to understand this is not to understand the nature of the Church itself.

We invite the reader to examine the subject of church membership. What purpose does it serve? Human reasons will abound, but the Bible is silent on membership as we know it today. Does that say anything to you at all?

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