

So, they want you to become a member?

My wife and I recently visited the services of a local church in our community. It was only a matter of a few weeks before we were solicited to “join the church” and “become a member.” Why is it that local churches are so keen to draw people into church membership?

When I asked people why it was so important to be a member of their church, their responses were almost ludicrous: “So you can serve on one of our committees” (as if I wanted to serve on another committee!). “So you can vote in the elections of the church” (participate in the ecclesiastical democracy). “So you can become a leader in the congregation and help to determine the direction and program of the church” (I thought the Church was to be led and directed by Jesus Christ).

The pastor of the local church presented us with an “Application for Membership” card that explained that by joining the church we would be making a covenant pledge to accept the responsibility to “contribute regularly,” to “work for the growth of the local body,” and to “commit ourselves to spread the Gospel.” Aha, just as I suspected, becoming a member is committing oneself to the legalistic performance responsibilities of giving money to the church, working as a free laborer, and recruiting others to do the same. This sounds strangely akin to asking someone to join a chain-gang while paying higher taxes for the privilege.

Membership or Member?

It is necessary for Christian people to differentiate between accepting *membership* in a local church (or denomination) and being a *member* of the Body, the Church of Jesus Christ. *Membership* in an organization is not the same as being a functional *member* of an organic body.

Nowhere in the Bible is there any reference to membership in a church organization. It is a concept that is foreign to the new covenant literature. On the other hand, there are several references (cf. Rom. 12:4,5; I Cor. 12:14-27; Eph. 3:6; 5:30) to Christians being members of the organic, spiritual Body of the Church that is enlivened by the very life of the living Lord Jesus. Drawing the analogy between the functional members of our physical body, Paul explains that every Christian is a functional member of the Body of Christ (cf. I Cor. 22-24).

My little “pinky” finger is a functional member of my physical body. Although it may be one of the “weaker members” that Paul mentioned (cf. I Cor. 12:22), it did not have to apply for membership to “join” my body, or make a “covenant pledge” and sign a statement to contribute and perform to make my body grow. Likewise, every Christian who has been overwhelmed by the Spirit of God into the Body of Christ (cf. I Cor. 12:13) is an organic member of the Church of Jesus Christ, and there is no divine requirement to “join” an organization with a commitment pledge to work towards its growth and advancement. Rather, the functionality of an organic member of the Body is derived from the Life within (cf. John 14:6), and directed by His Spirit (Rom. 8:14). Christians should never be pressured to make commitments of performance (as religion always does), but are to be receptive to the inner dynamic of the indwelling Spirit of Christ to bear fruit from the Root of the Vine (cf. John 15:5).

Defining the Church

Adding to the misunderstanding of what it means to be a member of the Church is the ambiguity of our usage of the word “church.” The most popular colloquial usage refers to a church building. Secondly, a church is identified as a legal and social organization formed for religious purposes most frequently performed within a church building. But the biblical reference to Church does not apply to a building or to the human formation of a legal institutional entity with defined polity and membership. The Church of Jesus Christ, as described in the New Testament, is the organic Body of Christ collectively expressing the life of the living Lord Jesus in the personal interactions of the members who have individually received Jesus as their life. The members of the Church are comprised of every Christian individual who has been “called out” (Greek *ecclesia*) to follow Jesus as a disciple, and therein to fellowship and commune together in their common participation in the Body of Christ.

Divine or Human Institution?

The Church, the Body of Christ, is a divine institution. It was instituted when Jesus declared, “Upon this rock I will build My Church” (Matthew 16:18). Upon the foundational rock of the faith expressed by Peter when he said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16), Jesus indicated He would build His organically functional Church wherein faithful Christians could collectively express His life and character together in one Body.

When many people refer to “church” they fail to differentiate between the divine institution of the Church and the human institution of the churches and denominations of churches that are legally formulated as organizations to provide visible and tangible form and structure to the spiritual abstract of the Body of Christ. Great perversion results when the human institution of a church organization is identified as synonymous with the divine institution of the organic Church, the Body of Christ. To join a religious group by accepting *membership* in their organization is not to be construed as equivalent to becoming a *member* of the Church of Jesus Christ which occurs only by the personal receipt of the life of Jesus Christ by faith. On the other hand, one who has received Jesus Christ as their life, and has thereby become a Christian and a *member* of the Body of Christ, is not necessarily required to seek *membership* in a church organization – despite the persistent and often pressured attempts to bring you into their “fold.” It is necessary, however, to clearly state that a Christian who is a member of the Body of Christ must not withdraw into isolated “lone ranger” individualism, for Christ within will always seek fellowship with other Christians in whom He indwells in order to collectively express His interpersonal love-life and His love for all mankind. We need each other for the complete functional expression of the Body of Christ. This may, or may not, be accomplished within the context of *membership* in any human institution of a church organization.

Some historical background

We have already noted that reference to membership in a church organization is not found in the New Testament. The apostle Paul was a member of the Body of Christ, the

singular and universal Church of Jesus Christ, and that by means of the presence and function of the living Lord Jesus who had become his life. Can you imagine the leaders of the church at Ephesus handing Paul an “Application for Membership,” and requiring him to consent to specified responsibilities to “pay, obey, and stay,” whereupon he would have to receive a majority vote of the congregation? I find that inconceivable! Yet, Christians today are members of the same singular and universal Church of Jesus Christ that Paul was a member of, and is it not equally implausible that they should be required to “join the church” in a process of church membership when they are already a member of the Church?

How and where did this practice of church membership commence if it was not part of the New Testament Church? During the centuries when the Roman Catholic Church was the primary expression of the Christian Church, church membership was imprudently equated with being a member of the Body of Christ, to the extent that the declaration was made, “There is no salvation apart from the Roman Catholic Church.” Church membership, as it is practiced in the church today, became a major issue after the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. The proliferation of different churches and denominations, with their various legal polities and doctrinal positions, fostered protective policies designed to preserve the distinctive features of their particular sect from change or corruption. Church membership became a legalistic means to institutionalize the supposed purity and absoluteness of their particular doctrines and practices – a form of censorship to exclude non-conformists and contrarians. The divisiveness of the Reformation churches facilitated the divisive practice of church membership, as we know it today.

Perversions of church membership

The “traditions of men” (Mark 7:8) always serve to subvert the ways of God, and the religious practice of church membership in the human institution of the churches has been increasingly perverted to the extent that it has become oppressive and abusive.

Authoritarian control – Leaders in local churches often let the power of their position “go to their head,” and usurp the authority that is the exclusive right of the Lord Jesus Christ in Christians’ lives. “All authority is given unto Me, in heaven and in earth” (Matthew 28:18), said Jesus. Many leaders seem to think that when someone becomes a member of their organization they have a right to exercise authority over them, to control their thought and behavior. They often quote Hebrews 13:17, “Obey your leaders and submit to them,” but seldom pay attention to the admonition to “not lord it over those in your charge” (I Peter 5:3). Church membership can easily degenerate into legalistic religious control of members’ thought and action, to the extent that members become “slaves of men” (I Cor. 7:23), shackled in a strait-jacket of limitations and expectations. Church membership often seems to carry an implied assent to submit and to be regulated and directed, reprimanded and disciplined by the leadership of the organization.

Possession – When a person accepts church membership in a religious organization there is an immediate sense of identification wherein the members of the group can claim that this person “belongs to us.” This person is on our membership roll. We can now count this person in our numerical and statistical calculations of success. Is it not enough to “belong to Christ” (I Cor. 3:23)? The particularization of church membership in a particular group tends to develop a divisive isolation from Christians identified with other churches.

Many leaders have discouraged their members from fellowship with Christians not associated as members of their group.

Identity – Even in the early Church there was a tendency to segment into sectarianism by identifying with one against another. Paul explained that the Corinthians Christians were polarizing into groups claiming, “I am of Paul, I am of Apollos, I am of Cephas” (I Cor. 1:12; 3:4,5), finding their identity in “mere men” who were but “servants of the Lord.” Church membership often facilitates similar false identities as people declare, “I am a Baptist. I am a Methodist. I am a Presbyterian.” The identity of the Christian is to be found in Jesus Christ. “I am a Christian, I am a Christ-one.” “I am a son of God through faith in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:26), and therefore “one in Christ” (Gal. 3:28) with every other Christian.

Need fulfillment – Church membership has often been offered as an identification and association wherein the local church will meet all of a person’s needs. The organization promises to fulfill the basic human needs of identity, meaning, purpose, belonging, fellowship, social involvement, relationships, service, etc. These basic human needs and everything necessary in the Christian life are to find fulfillment in the Lord Jesus Christ, rather than by means of a church organization. Otherwise, we are soon mired in ecclesiolatry – worship of the church, rather than worshipping the Lord.

Privileges – The competition among church organizations to acquire members and add to their numbers has led some to tout the privileges of membership in their group. In similarity to the American Express® credit card advertisement, they claim that “Membership Has Its Privileges,” implying that there are additional benefits to belonging to their church. Is there something more than Jesus? Every privilege of grace and freedom is to be found “in Christ,” and that without distinction. God has granted every Christian “everything pertaining to life and godliness” (II Peter 1:3).

Members of the Body of Christ

The objective of this article is to encourage Christians to recognize that first and foremost they are members of the Body of Christ, having received the very presence of the living Christ through faith. We have been “delivered from the domain of darkness, and transferred into the kingdom of the beloved Son” (Col. 1:13). As members of Christ’s collective Body we are responsible to defer (cf. Eph. 5:21) to one another in love, to utilize the giftedness conferred upon us (I Cor. 12-14; Rom. 12), and to participate in the building up of the Body (Eph. 4:12).

Church membership in a local or denominational organization is not wrong *per se*, and is not to be construed as contrary to scripture. Church organizations give form and structure to the spiritual reality of the Church of Jesus Christ. There is a definite social need to know “who’s on the team.” In many geographical locations there is even a legal requirement to identify the participants or members of a legitimate organization.

So, please understand that I am not attempting to denigrate church membership. I am not seeking to deter anyone from participating as a member in a local church. I am not a church-basher! I just want Christians to focus on what it means to be “in Christ” and members of the Body of Christ, while recognizing that church membership is a distinct option that has often been perverted and abused by religious organizations.