

Is Placing Membership With A Local Church Necessary?

I. INTRODUCTION

[Thanks to Joe Neil Clayton, Dennis Gullledge, Wayne Jackson and Robert G. Lee]

- A. In all the discussion about the work of the local church, we must address the question of membership in a local church. A convert to Christ does not "join" the universal church of Christ; he is "added" to it by God (Acts 2:41,47). A Christian *does* join himself to a local church, as Paul sought to do in Acts 9:26-29a.
- B. It is a bit difficult to understand why the question would ever be raised - "Must I be a member of a local church?" - in light of the abundant information on this theme in the New Testament. Think about the following considerations relative to the local church.
 - 1. In the early chapters of Acts, following the establishment of the church, there are numerous references acknowledging the "togetherness" of the early saints (2:42,44,46; 4:23-24,31-32, etc.). God never intended for Christians to function as isolated "islands" in a sea of worldly-oriented people. The body is not "one member, but many" (1 Cor. 12:14). It would be very difficult to miss Paul's point of emphasis when he spoke of the spiritual body of Christ as being "fitly framed and knit together through that which every member supplies." He takes note of the cooperative efforts of individual Christians "according to the working in due measure of each several part" for the increase of the body "unto the building up of itself in love" (Eph. 4:16-17). This divine goal can hardly been achieved if children of God meander about with their congregational membership in their pocket!

Note: It is not without significance that when Paul came to Jerusalem, following an escape from a dangerous circumstance in Damascus, he immediately attempted to "join himself to the disciples" of that city. And once their initial fear of him was alleviated, he was accepted (Acts 9:26ff).

- 2. Various New Testament texts make it clear that the early disciples assembled together as a body of people for the purpose of worship on the Lord's day (Acts 2:42; 20:7-12; 1 Cor. 11:17ff; 14:1-40; 16:1-

- 2). How could a Christian ever be admonished for forsaking an assembly (Heb. 10:25), if he is not even obligated to be a part of a local church?
3. God structured the individual congregation around an organization plan. Christ is the head of his church wherever it exists (Eph. 1:22-23; Col. 1:18), and so, ultimately, he is the head of his church in every city throughout the world. Further, however, in local churches, where qualified men exist (1 Tim. 3:1ff; Tit. 1:1ff), the group is supervised by “elders,” known also as bishops/overseers or pastors/shepherds.
- a. The members are to submit to their overseers in matters of expediency (1 Thes. 5:12; Heb. 13:17), and regard them highly for their work’s sake. While these shepherds are prohibited from arrogating themselves to the position of “lords” over their flock (1 Pet. 5:3), their exemplary leadership is to be revered and followed.
- b. Serving under these men, in special areas that implement other important tasks, are deacons, teachers, evangelists, etc. If Christ did not intend for his people to be a closely-bonded Christian family, why did he organize the local body in such a fashion?
- C. What is meant by the expression “place membership” as it pertains to a local congregation? We must admit that we cannot find that expression in the Bible. It may be for this reason that some think it an unscriptural concept. Is it?
1. In Romans 16:1, Paul wrote, “I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church in Cenchrea.” The subject of this verse is Phoebe. Paul identifies her as a Christian by referring to her as “our sister.” A Christian is one who has been immersed into Christ for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38). Her status was that of “a servant.” The word “servant” comes from the Greek word *diaconon*, and is by some rendered *deaconess*. That Phoebe served in whatever capacity women may serve God I have no doubt. That she served in any capacity of leadership over men I deny (1 Timothy 2:12). Her sphere of activity was “the church of Cenchrea.” She did not represent the “church at large” or “the church universal.” The church in Cenchrea was a congregation of God’s people in a specific locality, being a harbor town nine miles west of Corinth.

2. Sometimes brethren question whether placing membership in a local congregation is either necessary or scriptural. People have said, “I am a member of the church wherever I go.” I would not deny that statement, but I suggest that opponents to the idea of placing church membership need to carefully consider the New Testament teaching on this subject.

II. LESSON - Placing membership with a local church is essential for the following reasons:

A. For Reasons of Church Organization

1. The church of Christ, in its universal sense, is the general spiritual body over which Jesus Christ is the head and every Christian is a member (Matthew 16:18; Colossians 1:18, 24; Ephesians 1:22). There is no such thing in the Bible as becoming a Christian and “joining” the church later. The Lord adds the saved to the church (Acts 2:47).
2. There are times, in the New Testament, when the word *church* indicates a congregation of the disciples which comes together on the first day of the week to observe the Lord’s Supper and engage in other acts of public worship (Acts 20:7; Romans 16:5). Each congregation is independent. Paul addressed the church at Philippi saying, “Paul and Timothy, servants of Jesus Christ, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons” (1:1). *Saints* are members who work together in that given locality. *Bishops* are elders or overseers of that local church (1 Timothy 3:1-7). *Deacons* are qualified servants in that congregation (1 Timothy 3:8-10). The New Testament knows nothing of any organization either larger or smaller than the local congregation in doing the Lord’s work.

B. For Reasons of Involvement and Collective Obligations

1. Beyond individual Christian responsibilities there are collective obligations:
 - a. To share in the relief of saints in need. Acts 2:44-45; 1 Corinthians 16:1-3
 - b. To share in the collective support of evangelists. Philippians 4:15-19
 - c. To share in the mutual edification of the church. 1 Corinthians 14:26

- d. To share in the admonitions and discipline of the local church. James 2:1-13; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13
 - e. To share in the collective worship of God. Colossians 3:16-17; 1 Corinthians 11:17-33, etc.
2. If someone feels that he has no scriptural reason to identify himself with a local congregation, it is well to ask how he can contribute to the work of that church. There is no obligation that he feels to be involved in the work. There is no accountability to a group of elders. There is no loyalty to a home congregation. There is no joint participation when everyone is disjointed! Remember that Phoebe was involved with the church in Cenchrea as one of its members.

C. For Reasons of Oversight

1. Churches of Christ who have qualified men should have a plurality of elders overseeing the work of that congregation (Acts 1:23; Titus 1:5). These bishops are to shepherd the local flock. They do not have jurisdiction over any other congregation (Acts 20:28).
2. Picture, if you will, the following scenario. Mr. Jones moves from one community (town or city) to another. He was laboring under the oversight of the elders of congregation "A" where he lived formerly. Since he no longer lives in that town, it is not possible that the elders of congregation "A" can continue to watch in behalf of his soul, as they are obligated to do (Hebrews 13:17). Mr. Jones needs to find another faithful congregation (congregation "B") and let his desire to work and worship with them be known. This is what we mean by the expression "place membership." Actually, Brother Jones is a member of the body of Christ wherever he may go. Yet, he cannot function under the oversight of two congregations at once, or of all congregations (such as "the church at large" idea would suggest). It is amazing how some brethren fail to understand this elementary principle of Scripture. A church bulletin told of a deacon and his family leaving one congregation and going to another in the same city. The announcement said, "There is no other reason other than we both feel this is what we need and what we want to do. This congregation will always be our 'Church Home' . . . It's just we will be worshipping at a different location of the Lord's body."

3. Brethren need to identify themselves with a local congregation and work specifically under the oversight of those elders. How can elders watch for the souls of persons without knowing those who are committed to their care? Also, how can elders exercise the divinely given function of oversight unless persons submit to that oversight? Those brethren who prattle against the idea of placing membership in a local congregation actually oppose the Lord's design.

D. For Reasons of Apostolic Example

1. Soon after his conversion, Saul (Paul) worked with the church in Damascus:
“And when he had received food he was strengthened. Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus. Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God. Then all who heard were amazed, and said, ‘Is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name in Jerusalem, and has come here for that purpose, so that he might bring them bound to the chief priests?’ But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this Jesus is the Christ” (Acts 9:18-22).

From there he seeks to identify himself with the church in Jerusalem:
“And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. And he declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that he had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus. So he was with them at Jerusalem, coming in and going out” (vv. 26-28).

2. The *disciples* comprised the church in Jerusalem. To “join” them in their meetings, to work and be recognized as a member among them is like our “placing membership” with a local congregation today. To “join the disciples” is not the same as becoming a Christian. That occurred when Saul was immersed into Christ for the remission of sins (Acts 9:17-18; 22:16). To “join the disciples” is not the same as “joining a denomination,” since Protestant denominations did not exist in New Testament times. (1 Corinthians 12:13, 27 - For through the baptism of the one Spirit we were all formed into one body, Jews

or Greeks, servants or free men, and were all made full of the same Spirit... Now you are the body of Christ, and every one of you the separate parts of it.)

E. Why Do Some Resist Local Membership?

1. Occasionally there are those who are not affiliated with any local group of saints. There may be, under unusual circumstances, some rationale for this. Frequently there is not.
 - a. It may be the case that a Christian has moved into an area where there is no local congregation of the Lord's people. In that event, where such is feasible, he may need to drive to a city of reasonable proximity where he is able to locate a good church.
 - b. If one is not able to pursue that procedure, he should worship on the Lord's day in his home, and then seek to win others to the truth, thus establishing a new church in his town as soon as is possible. The same plan may have to be initiated if there is no faithful church nearby, i.e., one with whom he can worship and work conscientiously.
2. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon to find maverick disciples who simply do not wish to identify with any local church. Reasons for this neglect may be varied.
 - a. Some folks are so inflexibly opinionated that they cannot tolerate being in proximity with any Christian who does not yield to their every pronouncement. Leave such to themselves; it is better that they are isolated.
 - b. Not infrequently is the reality that some do not wish to be held responsible for their conduct. They desire to come and go at will. They do not want to be accountable for faithful attendance, consistent giving, or any other responsibility. They do not intend to have their lifestyle monitored. They repudiate the idea that they should be under the oversight of elders.
 - c. In a word, they want the "name" of being a Christian, but without the commitment that goes with such. And perhaps most of all, they do not intend to be in an environment where they might be subject to the discipline of the local congregation.

Such folks may entertain the illusion that they are serving God; they are not, however. Such ones have failed to comprehend one of the most fundamental aspects of Christian service.

III. CONCLUSION

A. "Can I be a Christian Without Joining the Local Church?"

Answer: Yes, it is as possible as being:

- A student who will not go to school.
- A soldier who will not join an army.
- A citizen who does not pay taxes or vote.
- A salesman with no customers.
- An explorer with no base camp.
- A seaman on a ship without a crew.
- A business man on a deserted island.
- An author without readers.
- A tuba player without an orchestra.
- A parent without a family.
- A football player without a team.
- A politician who is a hermit.
- A scientist who does not share his findings.
- A bee without a hive.

Robert G. Lee, SERMONIC LIBRARY, pp. 115-16.

B. Is placing membership in a local church necessary? It is indeed! Is it scriptural? Absolutely! The New Testament teaches that we are to be in a congregation, subject to the leadership of the elders, involved in that work and supportive of the Lord's cause in that place.

C. There are forces at work in the church to try to destroy the concept of the local church. By accepting the necessary implications of the truths of this lesson, we can successfully oppose the attempt. Christians need to imitate the intention of Paul, when he came to Jerusalem, and "*assay to join themselves to the disciples*" for worship and work.

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Scriptures referenced in this lesson:

I. INTRODUCTION

Acts 2:41, 47; 9:26-29a

Acts 2:42,44,46; 4:23-24,31-32; 1 Cor. 12:14; Eph. 4:16-17; Acts 9:26ff.

Acts 2:42; 20:7-12; 1 Cor. 11:17ff; 14:1-40; 16:1-2; Heb. 10:25

Eph. 1:22,23; Col. 1:18; 1 Tim. 3:1ff; Titus 1:1ff; 1 Thes. 5:12; Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:3

Rom. 16:1; 1 Tim. 2:12

II. LOCAL MEMBERSHIP ESSENTIAL FOR REASONS OF:

Church Organization

Mt. 16:18; Col. 1:18,24; Eph. 1:22; Acts 2:47

Acts 20:7; Rom. 16:5; Phil 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1-7; 8-10

Involvement and Collective Obligations

Acts 2:44-45; 1 Cor. 16:1-3

Phil. 4:15-19

1 Cor. 14:26

Jms. 2:1-3; 1 Cor. 5:1-13

Col. 3:16-17; 1 Cor. 11:17-33

Oversight

Acts 1:23; Titus 1:5; Acts 20:28

Heb. 13:17

Apostolic Example

Acts 9:18-28

Acts 9:17,18; 22:16; 1 Cor. 12:13,17

III. WHY DO SOME RESIST LOCAL MEMBERSHIP?

IV. CAN I BE A CHRISTIAN WITHOUT JOINING THE LOCAL CHURCH?

Robert G. Lee's ironic "yes!"

The emphatic scriptural "no!"