

Basic Bible Doctrine Study Series – Session 3

Church Membership

Before we delve in to the subject of church membership, let's first take just a bit and discuss the church itself. What is the church? Why is the church important? What is the purpose of the church?

What is the church? Well this question actually has two answers and depends on which group of people you are referring to. All Christians are part of His universal church...so that is one of the answers. The other answer or definition of the church is a local body of believers united in faith and practice. It is to this last definition of the church that this session of our study will focus on.

Why is the church important? Several reasons... The local church gives Christians the opportunity to separate themselves from the world for worship and the receiving of God's Word. It provides opportunity to use your God given gifts and skills to serve others. Most importantly, the church is important because it is Scriptural. Jesus established the local New Testament church and the apostles did their ministry through it. The Christian life in the New Testament is church life and we should expect and desire the same today.

What is the purpose of the church? Though there isn't a single verse that specifically defines the purpose of the church, Acts 2:42 gives us a nice, simple synopsis. "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." It would be good if ALL churches would model themselves after this verse. A true Bible believing, Bible teaching church will focus on worshipping God; will provide encouragement, instruction and structure for Christian living; will promote fellowship and Christian love; and most importantly stress the importance of evangelism.

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Now let's move on and discuss church membership. How many people have you heard say something similar to this...?

"I don't have to go to church to be saved."

"I don't have to belong to a church to be a Christian."

"I can worship God at home."

"I can listen to a TV preacher and get all the sermons I need."

This can sometimes be difficult to address since...to a point...this happens to be true. No church you join can make you a Christian. The Bible makes it abundantly clear that Jesus is the only way of salvation. So with that said, do Christians have a responsibility for membership?

To find the answer, we of course will look to the Bible. Hebrews 10:23-25 tells us, "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

The answer is a resounding YES...we Christians have a responsibility to be members of a local New Testament Church. Why? Simple...because it's scriptural. It is also important because it will keep us from drifting and making a shipwreck of our faith. From the moment we accept Christ, satan goes to work trying lure us into turning our backs on Jesus. He won't be satisfied until he renders us ineffective as Christians.

No...you don't have to go to church to be saved. Yes, you can worship God in your heart. But you do need the church to keep you on track. You do need the church to hold you accountable. You do need the church to remind you of your responsibility. You do need the church to care for you during the disasters of your life. You do need the church to encourage you as you keep walking down the right way. You don't need the church to be saved but you do need it to make sure you're living like you're saved.

None of us is immune from falling...not you, not me. Many people have learned this lesson the hard way. No amount of study, experience or theological training can make you "failsafe." The Apostle Paul was keenly aware of this fact and he was about as spiritual as any man in history. He wrote this in 1 Corinthians 9:27, "I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize."

There are many benefits associated with being part of a church family. At the same time, however, it also requires the invested time and resources of each and every member of the family. No home...or church...can function otherwise. The following illustration sums it up well...

As members of the body of Christ, we are like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Each piece has protrusions and indentations. The protrusions represent our strengths (gifts, talents, abilities), and the indentations represent our weaknesses (faults, limitations, shortcomings, undeveloped areas). The beautiful thing is that, when assembled, the pieces complement one another, blend inconspicuously and produce a beautiful picture.

The passage in Hebrews tells us to not give up meeting together but instead, encourage one another. Build up one another. The world specializes in tearing us down, not building us up. But that's not how it is supposed to be in the church. We're called to be professional encouragers.

Every family makes occasional mistakes; the church is no different. Hurting people are sometimes overlooked. Signals are misread, wires get crossed. But the measure of a church is the effort it puts into preventing defection from the faith by caring for people--not the expanse of its buildings, the acreage of its property or the size of its congregation.

It is clear that God's plan for His people is that we belong to a local New Testament church. This is for our own protection and growth as well as for the good of others. What's the bottom line? Local church membership is a question of biblical obedience, not personal preference.