

Church Fellowship

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WHILE the New Testament makes mention of the universal Church which embraces all believers in every age and country, it also lays great stress upon local churches - companies of believers, who are covenanted together in various places, for the corporate worship and service of God. Hence we read of 'the church at Jerusalem', 'the church which was at Antioch', 'the church of God, which is at Corinth', 'the churches of Galatia' etc. (Acts 8:1; 13:1; 1 Cor 1:2; Gal 1:2).

It is a fundamental scriptural principle that all persons professing faith in Christ should become members of a gospel church somewhere in their locality. The New Testament shows that, from earliest times, it was the practice of the Lord's people to 'join' a church (Acts 5:13; 9:26).

Like Paul (in Acts 9:26), they would first apply for membership and then, if the church was satisfied about their spiritual state, they would be formally, but affectionately, 'received' (Acts 18:27; Rom 16:1, 2). No longer regarded as visitors or adherents, these believers would thereafter be recognized as incorporated 'members' of the 'body' (1 Cor 12:27).

This is the divine ideal: the local church as a close-knit community, in which the members are committed to the Lord and to one another, striving unitedly for the advancement of the church in truth, holiness, love, comfort, and zeal (See: Acts 4:32; Phil 1:27). Church members should therefore be 'fitly framed' or 'joined together' (Eph 2:21; 4:16), which implies, in the words of Stephen Ford (1675), that they be 'well and orderly formed together into a church, house, or temple of God'. Furthermore, as Ford goes on to say, allusion being made here to 'the Temple of God at Jerusalem', 'a fixed settled place of God's worship', these scriptures

evidently discountenance the practice of some, who 'occasionally meet together for worship', with the result that 'they may be here today and gone tomorrow'.

Yet, sadly, conduct of this kind is common in our churches. Members behave increasingly like spiritual 'Gypsies', attending, or absenting themselves, according to whim, and without regard to principle.

There are strong biblical reasons for censuring this practice:

First of all, the nature of a particular church requires that members faithfully attend the services and meetings. The church is a covenanted community: by which we mean that it consists of people who have voluntarily associated, under special covenant, to maintain the truth, worship, government, service, and communion of the Gospel. The very word 'join' (to which reference has already been made, Acts 5:13; 9:26) means 'to glue together' and, since it is used elsewhere of the relationship between a man and his wife (Matt 19:5 - translated there 'cleave'), it denotes, as Dr Gill observes, 'that strict union there is between saints in church relation' and shows that 'their incorporation together is by mutual consent and agreement'.

To abandon the church (without seeking honourable release), upon pretence of being 'happier' somewhere else, is to break a solemn engagement and to violate the church's covenant. This is a serious fault, included by the Holy Spirit in lists of highly grievous and offensive sins (Rom 1:31; 2 Tim 3:3).

Secondly, the Lord's people are commanded to attend their church, whenever practicable. Writing to a church of believing Israelites, probably the

church at Jerusalem, the apostle tells his readers to care for one another as members of the same body and not to neglect their public and stated gatherings for worship. His actual words are as follows: 'Not forsaking the assembling of yourselves together, as the manner of some is' (Heb 10:25). From these words, we deduce, along with Isaac Chauncy (1697), that if someone is 'joined to and become a member (of a church)' he is obliged 'to attend ordinarily upon the ministry and ordinances administered in that church'.

Our word 'schism' is a translation of a Greek word which means a 'cutting', 'rent' or 'division'; hence, it comes to mean a 'violation of the unity of the church'. As an act contrary to God's express Will, it cannot be regarded other than as sinful. Thus Paul blames the Corinthians for their 'divisions' and 'contentions' (1 Cor 1:10, 11; 11:17, 18).

Thirdly, the example of the earliest Christians enforces this apostolic injunction. Their practice was to adhere to the church in which they had become members. Once 'added', the members of the church at Jerusalem, we read, 'continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers' (Acts 2:42). Dr J.A. Alexander observes that 'the Greek verb here used strictly denotes personal attendance, sticking close to anything or person'. Clearly, the idea being conveyed is the constancy of these members in meeting together for worship and edification.

It would be a mistake to think that this was something peculiar to the Jerusalem church. According to Paul, the same practice was to be found at Corinth. The apostle is able confidently to assume that all the members of that church will also meet together on the Lord's Day. He writes to them about their conduct when they 'come together in the church', 'into one place' (1 Cor 11:18, 20).

Fourthly, Scripture places great emphasis and value upon good order. 'God', we are told, 'is not

the author of confusion, but of peace; as in all the churches of the saints' (1 Cor 14:33). Characterised himself by harmony and peace, he always acts in a regulated, controlled, and proper manner; and even more to the point in this connection, he insists that his church demonstrates the same kind of orderliness. 'Let all things be done decently, and in order' (1 Cor 14:40).

As a minister, Paul was therefore careful to act faithfully and consistently, in accordance with God's Word (2 Thess 3:7; cf 1 Thess 2:10). In his epistles, he authoritatively taught church members to follow his example. At the close of 1 Thessalonians, he writes: 'Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly (margin: 'disorderly')...' (1 Thess 5:14). It would seem that his exhortation did not produce the desired effect, for later, in his second epistle, he addresses the very same problem, but this time insisting upon firm disciplinary action: 'We command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly...' (2 Thess 3:6; cf Rom 16:17). In both instances, the word used is 'a military term applied to the soldier who does not remain in the ranks, and thence (it is) used more generally of whatever is out of order' (Dr. George Milligan).

If members, without good cause, desert a true, gospel church, they act in a manner which can only be described as 'disorderly'.

Fifthly, it is the ordinance of God that there every pastor (and ruling elder) should have a flock. Addressing the several officers of the Ephesian church, Paul says: 'Take heed unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God...' (Acts 20:28 cf 1 Pet 5:1, 2). This is not to deny, of course, that a minister may exercise a general ministry among the churches, but it is to affirm that he has a special charge over one particular church. As Samuel Rutherford once wrote: 'We hold

that by a calling or ordination he is made a pastor, by election (of a church) he is restricted to be ordinarily the pastor of his flock'. Since this is the divine arrangement, it ill becomes sheep to forsake their shepherd and fold. Silly, wandering sheep ought not be encouraged: they ought to be lovingly and firmly restored.

This point, perhaps, deserves a little more emphasis. In acknowledgement of God's ordinance, church members are to show honour and respect to their pastors, always seeking their strengthening and encouragement (1 Tim 5:17; Phil 2:29 mg.). Thus, the apostle says that members are so to respect their spiritual leaders that those leaders may give account to God 'with joy' and 'not with grief' (Heb 13:17; cf 3 Jn 4). Yet how many good pastors have been heartbroken, I wonder, by people leaving, at their own will and pleasure, creating for the church thereby a serious problem if not a major crisis? Of course, these members never give that a moment's thought, but they should realise that God observes their conduct and warns them, in his Word, that they shall sooner or later find it 'unprofitable' (Heb 13:17). 'It is, and will be so', remarks Dr Owen, 'in the displeasure of Christ, and in all the severe consequences which will ensue thereon'.

Sixthly, there is a special providence to be considered. An invisible but almighty hand directs both our persons and our actions, as the prophet Jeremiah said: 'O Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps' (Jer 10:23; cf Ps 37:23; Prov 20:24). It is important to reflect upon God's gracious providential dealings with us. We are to 'regard...the works of the Lord' and so to 'observe these things' that we might 'understand' (Ps 28:5; 107:43). It may be that, in the providence of God, we were born in a particular church, or converted there, or led there. However it was, we cannot deny that God placed us in its membership and we should therefore not

decide to move unless he makes that unmistakably clear.

There is a psalm which speaks of 'those that be planted in the house of the Lord' (Ps 92:13). Our wisdom surely to accept that, submitting to the divine will which is 'good, and perfect, and acceptable'. When a professing believer acts impetuously, without reference to providence, he exposes himself to great danger. 'As a bird that wandereth from her nest; so is a man that wandereth from his place' (Prov 27:8).

Seventhly, godly people are taught by grace to feel a love for the church, along with its sacred meetings and holy ordinances. Gladly would they express their feelings in the words of David: 'Lord, I have loved the habitation of thy house, and the place where thine honour dwelleth' (Ps 26:8; cf 42:4; 122:1). The Psalmist had in mind, of course, the Tabernacle at Jerusalem; but such language can be used with respect to a local, particular church, because - in a real sense - that too is 'the house of God', where 'saints' are 'builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit' (1 Tim 3:15; Eph 2:22).

Why is any church desirable and delightful? Surely because Christ has established it, appointed its ordinances, blessed it with officers, entrusted to it his Word, and granted it his special and gracious presence (Matt 18:17; 1 Cor 11:23; Eph 4:11; Col 4:16; Rev 2:1). These are the chief reasons why so many of the Lord's people love their local church. Yet, sad to say, there are some who, in departing, speak critically and reproachfully of the church; and still others who, by their comings and goings, treat the church more like a hotel than a spiritual home.

Let no-one be deceived: such conduct is inconsistent in persons professing faith and godliness. Divisions in the Corinthian church moved Paul to ask the members this question: 'Despise ye the church of God...?' (1 Cor 11:22). How scandalous

and blameworthy it was - and still is - to show contempt for one of Christ's churches!

Eighthly, Christians living in obedience to God's Word will seek the prosperity of the local church. Taking heed to the directive, 'Let all things be done unto edifying (or, 'upbuilding', 1 Cor 14:26; cf Rom 14:19), they will do all they can to promote both the church's spiritual growth and its numerical increase, so that like the churches throughout Judea and Galilee, their own particular church may be 'edified' and 'multiplied' (Acts 9:31). Needless to say, it is far otherwise with those members who suddenly withdraw, denying the church any further help or support. They tear themselves from the body, pluck themselves out of the vineyard, and break themselves away from the temple, leaving their former church tragically marred and perhaps even ruined (See: Rom 12:4; 1 Cor 3:9; Eph 2:20-22).

Furthermore, their divisive behaviour may lose for the church the manifested presence of 'the God of love and peace' (2 Cor 13:11). It may also hinder the gospel's success in the salvation of sinners, for it cannot be denied that when church members are 'all with one accord in one place', people outside are often convinced, converted, and 'added to the church' (Acts 2:1; 2:46; cf 4:32).

Ninthly, while the Holy Spirit's work is to make believers one, their God-given responsibility is to maintain the unity of the church (Eph 4:3; cf Rom 14:19; 2 Cor 13:11). This requires the exercise of those graces which make for continuing harmony and peace: 'all lowliness, and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love' (Eph 4:2). Love, the last mentioned grace, is invaluable and indispensable. It is, as James Fergusson once remarked, 'the fountain of all the rest, and especially of mutual forbearance'. Now, this grace, along with the others, is conspicuous by its absence in those who readily take offence, harbour deep resentment,

express unkind criticism, refuse every overture, and deliberately break church fellowship (See, for example, 1 Cor 13:4-7 and 1 Jn 4:7-21).

Indeed, it is to be feared that when these graces fail to appear, natural corruptions are ready and quick to take over. Experience shows that often when people leave a church, their stated reasons for doing so are no more than mere excuses. The real reasons are not given because they are usually unspiritual, if not manifestly carnal. Perhaps there is a growing sympathy for a different kind of doctrine (Acts 20:31; Gal 5:20), or a hankering after greater freedom both in worship and conduct (1 Cor 14:26ff., Gal 5:13-15), or a desire for change and variety (2 Tim 4:3; cf Acts 17:21), or a pursuit of some kind of position (Phil 2:3; James 3:14-16), or an unwillingness to be friendly towards others (Prov 18:24; 2 Cor 6:11-13). Please do not take my words for this. Look up the references for yourselves!

Tenthly, and lastly, the chief purpose of a church is to manifest the glory of the Lord, by appearing as something beautiful for him; but that purpose can only be fulfilled in a lovingly united church. 'Behold', says the Psalmist, 'how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!' (Ps 133:1)

Christ is dishonoured by church divisions, because they are really church disfigurements. What kind of glory does he have when his kingdom, city, or house appears divided against itself and ready to fall? (Matt 12:25) Now the fact that his glory is bound up in the church's peace and harmony will make true Christians think long and hard before abandoning their local church.

Church fellowship is a very sacred bond which, though not indissoluble, should never be broken without a just cause. The way some transfer themselves from one church to another is manifestly wrong and it can only be deplored. As a minister of the last century once said, 'A man may be a member

of an independent church, but an independent member he cannot be'.