

Where Would Jesus Place Membership?

There are many churches that wear the name "church of Christ" today. There are big churches and little churches. There are young churches and old churches. There are hot churches and cold churches. There are certainly churches which no longer follow what the Lord said. Many have given themselves to entertainment, recreation, and erroneous teaching to the point that they are no longer following the Lord.

Over a lifetime, most Christians move several times due to school, marriage, and job opportunities. Usually, when a family moves into a community, they visit all area congregations to find one with which they feel comfortable and useful. Any given family's or individual's decision is probably made up of several different elements and will most likely differ from family to family or individual to individual.

"Placing membership" is not a scriptural term, but it is a scriptural concept. Some dismiss the need for newcomers to identify with a local congregation. In order to become a member of a local church, a baptized believer must join himself to one as Paul did at Damascus (Acts 9:19), and attempted to do later at Jerusalem (Acts 9:26). The disciples at Jerusalem refused to accept Paul into their fellowship until he was introduced to them by Barnabas (Acts 9:27-28). Two important points are illustrated by this incident. First, Christians have responsibility to maintain fellowship with other Christians where they are (Acts 2:42). Second, local churches are to refuse fellowship to those who are not Christians or do not live properly (1 Corinthians 5:2, 11; 2 Thessalonians 3:6).

The New Testament does not teach the existence of a member of the church at large. Even the traveling preachers of the first century had a church that sent them; a church to which they were answerable. Furthermore, there are many commands in the New Testament that the Christian cannot keep without being part of a local church. How is it possible for one to be subject to the elders of a church unless it is known that he is a part of that church? How can one be an integral part of the work of a local congregation and truly be known as being in fellowship with them without some sort of declaration of intent? We confess Christ with our mouth before being baptized. Jesus taught that we use our mouth when we repent to those we have sinned against (Luke 17:3-4). We do this so that others will know our purpose and intent. What kind of a collapse of common sense would it take to say that it is unnecessary to declare our intention to work with other saints in a local congregation?

Some try to play down the importance of membership in a local church, but Paul speaks of being removed from the fellowship of a local church because of sin as being "delivered unto Satan" (1 Corinthians 5:5). There is no way for a Christian to function properly without performing the works God requires be done in company with other Christians. To do many of these he must be a member of a local church. When a person moves from one place to another he must move his membership with him. If he moves back again, he should move his membership back. When Apollos went from Ephesus to Corinth (Acts 18:27) his membership did not remain at Ephesus. When Paul moved from Damascus to Jerusalem he did not leave his membership at Damascus (Acts 9:26-29).

A local church is able to identify those who hold membership in it. If this is not the case, none could ever be removed from the membership of a local church as in 1 Corinthians 5:5. If none ever expressed their intent to be a member of a particular church at a certain place how could any who did not qualify ever be refused? Paul told the elders of the church at Ephesus that they knew how he had been with them at all seasons from the first day he had come into Asia (Acts 20:18). It is the responsibility of every Christian to so live that he will be able to say the same about himself that Paul did, wherever he goes. So if Jesus were seeking to place membership with a congregation, what kind would He choose? Once He gave an appraisal of seven churches located in Asia Minor (Revelation 2-3), we find seven characteristics Jesus looks for in a church.

Jesus Wants A Church That Is Not Left Its First Love (2:1-7)

The church at Ephesus was told to repent because of its poor attitude. God is concerned with "heart trouble" and will not accept right actions springing from insincere hearts. Christ wants His church to be friendly, warm, and considerate. Non-Christians recognize that we are of Christ by our love (John 13:33-34). People want to be a part of a warm church where members genuinely love each other and are not afraid to show it (Philemon 5; 1 Peter 1:22). But remember that the church is only as warm, loving, and friendly as each member.

Jesus Wants A Church That Is Rich Without Money (2:8-11)

The church at Smyrna did not have much money or a nice building, but Christ said they were rich (2:9). Many people today look for a church that is wealthy and influential with a cathedral-like building, all-purpose gymnasium, and outward signs of prosperity. These do not impress the Lord; in fact, some of these are downright wrong. He would rather churches faithfully use its funds to be "rich in good works."

Jesus Wants A Church That Does Not Tolerate False Doctrine (2:12-17)

The church at Pergamos was too tolerant of those who taught the doctrine of Balaam and the Nicolaitans. Christ hated these false teachings (3:15), but the Christians in Pergamos want "to live and let live," "be broad-minded," and "not hurt anyone's feelings." They failed to realize that they were hurting God's feelings by dishonoring His name, disregarding His truth, destroying His church, and condemning innocent souls. We are to test preachers (1 John 4:1), mark those which cause divisions (Romans 16:17), be set for the defense of the gospel (Philippians 1:17), and earnestly contend for the faith (Jude 3). We should not desire to be a part of a church that invites or supports those who are not sound in the faith. God does not long tolerate those who tolerate false teachers.

Jesus Wants A Church That Does Not Fellowship The Immoral (2:18-29)

Jezebel worshipped at Thyatira and shamed Christ's church by her immorality (2:22-23). The Corinthian church had a similar problem (1 Corinthians 5:1). Paul's inspired solution was to "*deliver such a one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh ...*" (5:5). Today many churches openly fellowship those who are living in adultery, allow immodest mixed swimming, look the other way when someone wears immodest clothing, silently sanction teens as majorettes, dancing girls, and cheerleaders, and implicitly support dancing and social drinking. Christ is no more pleased with these present supports of immorality than He was with the church at Thyatira.

Jesus Wants A Church That Is Not Dead (3:1-6)

The church at Sardis had a reputation of being alive, but Jesus said they were dead. They probably were known for their social schedule but Christ was looking for spiritual strength. Were they "zealous of good works" (Titus 2:14)? Were they interested in the church growing, Bible study, supporting preachers, inviting friends to worship services, building up the faith of young Christians, helping the needy, and encouraging the downtrodden? Such is evident of spiritual life (James 1:27).

Jesus Wants A Church That Has Kept His Word (3:7-13)

Every church was measured by the same ruler and was commended or condemned by how well they obeyed the truth. The faithful church at Philadelphia was complimented because it was scriptural. This should be one's first concern in choosing a congregation with which to identify. Is the truth taught faithfully and do the members demand obedience from other members? If these questions can be answered affirmatively, then Christ is

pleased with that church, and we can feel comfortable working and worshipping there.

Jesus Wants A Church That Is Not Lukewarm (3:14-22)

Maintaining status quo is not enough. Christ never wants His people satisfied while souls remain in Satan's clutches. A church full of Sunday morning Christians made the Lord sick at Laodicea and still does today (3:15). We must be careful that the cares of this world do not slow us down (1 Corinthians 9:26-27), that the deceitfulness of riches does not blur our vision of spiritual matters (2 Corinthians 5:7), and that the pleasures of this world do not become more important to us than a favorable resurrection (1 John 2:15-17). We must be dedicated and energetic for every good word and work (2 Thessalonians 2:17).

Christ is choosing congregations today. He will not place His name in a directory or on a church "roll," but He is placing names on heaven's roll. He still removes candlesticks and blots out sinner's names from the book of life. Though each will be judged individually, the local church one attends will largely determine whether or not that person goes to heaven. Let us make the church what Christ expects so that no apology needs to be made.

Adapted From Allen Webster