

LOCAL CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Donald Townsley

Among the many subjects about which there is widespread misunderstanding, the matter of identifying with a local congregation and the responsibilities that go with church membership rank high on the list. The problem simply stated is this: Many do not understand the importance of local church affiliation when they move from one location to another. They do not understand that they must identify themselves with the local church in the community into which they have moved; and many also do not understand the responsibility of local church membership. They do not understand their obligations to the local church because they misunderstand the local church relationship.

There are some relationships in this life from which one may just "pick up his hat" and walk away. For example, one could find the conditions of employment so unsatisfactory that he would just have to quit his job after giving due notice; or, one might be unhappy with the school he (or she) may be attending and change schools. These would be relationships that one could just "pick up" and leave without any great damage to anyone. Then there are some relationships in this life from which one may not just walk away (with honor) without first adjusting his responsibilities before he leaves. Church membership is one of these relationships.

Membership in the local church is a family-type relationship (I Tim. 3:15). This type relationship carries obligations with its privileges, but all that many members of the church want out of church membership are the privileges with no obligations ! What father, mother or child is free to just get up and leave his or her obligations to the family of which they are a part? (I Tim. 5: 4,8,16; Eph. 6: 1 - 4). If one does get tired of the privileges of the home, he still has responsibilities which must be adjusted before he can leave that home ! If one does leave without first adjusting his obligations, then the state will move in to see that these obligations are adjusted. Now, I ask the question, does the church member have any less responsibility to adjust his obligations to the local church before he leaves than a member of a family has? I think we all know the answer !

Leaving a Local Church with Honor

Local church membership is obtained by mutual consent (Acts 9: 26 - 28). The word "church" is used in two senses in the New Testament: (1) The universal sense -- including all the saved (Matt. 16: 18), which is entered by baptism for the remission of sins (Acts 2: 38, 47; I Cor. 12:13; John 3: 3 - 5); and (2) the local sense. The local church is an organic body. It is Christians jointly acting with other Christians (Phil. 1:1; Rom. 16:16; Acts 14:23). When a person decides he wishes to leave the congregation he is presently a member of, and become a member of another congregation, he should let his intentions be known to the church he is leaving so that his responsibilities can be adjusted before he leaves. This way he can leave with the consent of the brethren, and they can end their relationship with the same happy note and upon the same friendly terms it was first established. This leaves the way open for the return of this member at some future time if he should so desire.

In New Testament times brethren wrote letters of commendation when a member went to another congregation. When Apollos went from Ephesus to Achaia, the brethren at Ephesus wrote

a letter of commendation for him (Acts 18: 27 - 19: 1). Paul included such a commendation on behalf of Phoebe in the Roman letter (Romans 16: 1 - 2). No brethren, it is not denominational to write letters when a Christian is moving his membership. Churches could avoid a lot of problems and sorrow if more of this were done.

A Common Practice in the Church Today

The usual practice in most congregations today is to accept into the local church any stranger who comes along claiming he (or she) is a member of the church of Christ somewhere. The leadership in most churches accept these people at face-value -- making no investigation of them whatsoever. Not many churches today are like the Jerusalem church. The Jerusalem church did not let Paul become a part of them until they knew something about him (Acts 9: 26 - 27). It is the God-given right of each local church to control its own fellowship (Acts 9: 26 - 27; I Cor. 5: 1 - 5). Many times today's leaders living in the same city will not even go to the trouble to pick up the telephone to investigate members who are moving their membership from some other church they count doctrinally faithful. As a result of this laxity and irresponsibility, they many times receive members who are irresponsible and are hunting the privileges with no obligations -- members who just "walk off" from another church without saying one word ! This procedure of taking members also allows false teachers to come in along with immoral persons. Anytime a leadership is so "number-hungry" that they cannot take the time to investigate incoming members, they have put the church in the position of becoming a "catch-all", and in time untold trouble will be the result.

(Editor's note: Many of the thoughts in the foregoing article were taken from a good article on the same subject by brother Edward Nowlin.)

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(From "The Voice" November 1975)