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Membership of a church – is it necessary??

A word to many who attend Free Presbyterian services

By Rev Ivan Foster

And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers, Acts 2:42.

This is an important matter in a day of lawlessness when God's order is defied, neglected and overthrown in many lives. In order to enjoy the fulness of God's blessing we must be conformed to all His commandments and laws.

The persons referred to in our text are true converts to Christ. They were the product of Holy Ghost conviction in a day we can only call a day of mighty revival power as it has never been known since. These were a people, doubtless of all ages, who acted upon the Word of God that was preached to them by the apostles that wonderful day. "Then they that gladly received his word were baptised." They were the glad receivers of the Word of God. They openly professed their faith by being baptised. Furthermore, they were added unto the church, verses 41, 47. That means they "joined the church", took their place amongst the ranks of the ekklesia, the called-out gathering of people professing faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The question before us is whether membership of a church is necessary. I think I can answer the question to everyone's satisfaction by saying 'yes' because it is clear that such was the practice of the apostolic believers under the directions of the apostles of Christ. If we would follow in the footsteps of 1st century Christianity then true believers must join a Bible-believing and Bible-practising church.

But what does it mean to 'join' a church?

I think that such is the core of the matter. We have the answer to that question in this portion of God's Word.

I. IT MEANS ADHERING TO THE DOCTRINE OF THE WORD OF GOD

It can be seen immediately that these believers committed themselves to the apostles' doctrine, that is, the apostles' teaching.

Membership is a voluntary obeying of the Word of God. Their life from then on was lived within the confines of the teachings of God's Word. Christians are people of "that way", Acts 19:19, 23. This is what it means to follow Christ as His disciple. In Psalm 40:6-8, we have a description of Christ the Faithful Servant of His Father. "Sacrifice and offering thou didst not desire; mine ears hast thou opened: burnt offering and sin offering hast thou not required. Then said I, Lo, I come: in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law is within my heart."

If we would follow Him it requires our submission to that to which He was submitted. His ear was opened, "pierced or digged." He heard and obeyed all of the Word of His Father.

Membership is a steadfast obedience. It was a continual and dedicated adherence to the teaching set before them by the apostles. It says that they "continued stedfastly" their following of the Word of God. Is not steadfastness a scarce virtue today? Wandering around, looking in here and there is the norm for all too many today. Church attendance is a mere bout of religious window shopping!

This was not the case of the converts on the day of Pentecost.

II. IT MEANS A SUBMITTING TO THE RULE OF THE CHURCH

They adhered stedfastly to the apostles' fellowship. That means they accepted the position and role of the apostles within the church and freely associated with them as God's rulers within the church.



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There are those offices appointed of God and those who occupy them have the authority of God to act according to the responsibilities of the office.

Consider these verses.

"Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation. Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you," Hebrews 13:7, 17.

"And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. And be at peace among yourselves," 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13.

"And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed," 2 Thessalonians 3:14.

"Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine," 1 Timothy 5:17.

In Acts 20:27-28, Paul speaks to the elders at Ephesus and instructs them in their duty.

"For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God. Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood," Acts 20:27-28.

Here is why we must submit to those godly elders who rule the Church of God for they are God's appointed "overseers", the word means "bishop" or as the office is also termed in other scriptures, 'elder'.

The word for elder is presbuteros, the word from which we get Presbyterian - government by elders.

Membership in a Christian church requires us submitting to God's officers.

III. IT MEANS FAITHFUL ATTENDANCE AT THE MEETINGS OF THE CHURCH

"And they continued stedfastly in breaking of bread, and in prayers," verse 42.

Here are two very important meetings of the church where witness is borne to the truth of the gospel. These must be supported by the faithful member. We are warned by Paul of that tendency which arises at times amongst professing Christians. "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching," Hebrews 10:25.

The word "forsaking" means to "abandon." It is the word used by the Saviour while hanging on the cross. "And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Matthew 27:46.

To avoid abandoning the ways of God and His people it is necessary for us to bind ourselves to the fellowship of God's people and earnestly seek to maintain that close bond. Ruth wonderfully stated just what it is we should seek to maintain in our association with believers.

"And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the LORD do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me. When she (Naomi) saw that she was stedfastly minded to go with her, then she left speaking unto her," Ruth 1:16-18.1.

We must not allow fear to deter us.



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"Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching," Hebrews 10:25.

Many fears arise to test the believer. Persecution is the most obvious but fear may deter the believer when there is no violent persecution. There is the fear of being laughed at, the fear of jeopardising our employment or our business prospects. These are very real fears though those faithful souls who gave their bodies to the burning rather than deny the Saviour, might not deem such "fears" of any great substance. Nevertheless, Christians need to beware of the danger that may arise from such lesser threats.

We must not allow the failure of others to deter us. "As the manner of some is." Paul is saying that they should not be deterred by the shameful departure of others. How often people have, like sheep, followed what others do without really knowing why they are doing it. We must be steadfast in our adherence to the practice that God has ordained for His people.

We must not allow the frivolous attitudes of the age influence us. "Exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching."

There is today a spirit of frivolity abroad whereby the things of God are treated in a trivial manner. Adherence to the teaching of the Bible is counted of no real importance, rather a man's own notions and "feelings" become the authority by which he lives.

This is the spirit of apostasy at work, that "mystery of iniquity" which Paul tells us "doth already work," 2 Thessalonians 2:7. We must, in these evil times, guard ourselves against this spirit and cling closely to the Word of God and to the fellowship of God's people.

IV. IT MEANS COMMITTING YOURSELF TO THE FINANCIAL SUPPORT OF THE CHURCH.

"And all that believed were together, and had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need," Acts 2:44-45. Accompanying this wonderful and steadfast adherence to the ministry of God's Word under the tutelage of the apostles there was a spirit of generous giving to the work of God. Not just their souls and bodies were committed to the Lord to be used in His service but also their possessions were also committed by them to the wellbeing and furtherance of the work of God.

This is a more important truth than some suppose. "Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings. Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation. Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it. And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, and he shall not destroy the fruits of your ground; neither shall your vine cast her fruit before the time in the field, saith the LORD of hosts. And all nations shall call you blessed: for ye shall be a delightsome land, saith the LORD of hosts," Malachi 3:8-12.

Generous giving to the work of God is a definite evidence of a heart that is right with God.

It is a requirement that is perfectly fair and equitable. So argued Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:7-18.

"Who goeth a warfare any time at his own charges? who planteth a vineyard, and eateth not of the fruit thereof? or who feedeth a flock, and eateth not of the milk of the flock? Say I these things as a man? or saith not the law the same also? For it is written in the law of Moses, Thou shalt not muzzle the mouth of the ox that treadeth out the corn. Doth God take care for oxen? Or saith he it altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, this is written: that he that ploweth should plow in hope; and that he that thresheth in hope should be partaker of his hope. If we have sown unto you spiritual things, is it a great thing if we shall reap your carnal things? If others be partakers of this power over you, are not we rather? Nevertheless we have not used this power; but suffer all things, lest we should hinder the gospel of Christ. Do ye not know



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that they which minister about holy things live of the things of the temple? and they which wait at the altar are partakers with the altar? Even so hath the Lord ordained that they which preach the gospel should live of the gospel. But I have used none of these things: neither have I written these things, that it should be so done unto me: for it were better for me to die, than that any man should make my glorying void. For though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of: for necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel! For if I do this thing willingly, I have a reward: but if against my will, a dispensation of the gospel is committed unto me. What is my reward then? Verily that, when I preach the gospel, I may make the gospel of Christ without charge, that I abuse not my power in the gospel."

Irrespective of what some may teach, God has ordained a system of support for the labourers in the gospel.

Such support denotes an awareness of the debt we owe to Christ. "For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich," 2 Corinthians 8:9. Paul uses the glorious generosity of Christ, displayed upon the cross, as an incentive to believers to give generously to the aid and assistance of others in need.

Please prayerfully consider these few thoughts and may the Lord be pleased to bless them to your establishment in the faith and your imitating of those early converts to the gospel of Christ on the day of Pentecost.

(Based upon a message preached in Kilskeery prayer meeting, 30th October 1996)