

Conversations for Change

Article Three:

Church Membership

As we think about the issue of church membership, we are really addressing the implications of the first article dealing with the nature of the church. If the church is more dynamic and organic as opposed to institutional, then the issues of membership change dramatically.

In the past I have treated membership as a very formal process. In fact, I have even likened it to marriage. When a new family would come into our fellowship, we regarded them as though they were “courting” the church. We attempted to make our warts visible by offering a *Let’s Get Acquainted* class. We wanted full and up-front disclosure so that people could make informed decisions. Once they had taken the class, they needed to fill out a questionnaire and meet with representatives of the board. Next, they needed to address the congregation in sharing their salvation story followed by a public acceptance of our membership covenant. After reading the membership covenant in unison, I would list a series of four questions whereby both the joining family and the congregation would answer simultaneously with the words, “I Do” or “We Will.” Then, they would sign and date the covenant.

Leaving the church was an equally formal process. If there was no discipline involved, we would seek to get individuals to sign a letter of resignation stating their reasons for leaving the church. This letter would put them on record that they were no longer viewed as members of the church. The letter would be read aloud in any Members’ Meeting (or business meeting).

This entire process was held and taught with a great deal of conviction and passion since I believed that the local church was indeed an institution. However, conflict arose in my own mind and heart a few years ago as I sought to define my responsibility as a pastor. Was I responsible to shepherd the people who had not put themselves under my charge? How was I to care, if at all, for people who were not members of our church? There were plenty of people coming to our services who gave good testimony of saving grace, but were not members. Was I answerable to God for them? At the same time, there were a number of people who concerned me because although they were attending our services on a regular basis they did not seem to indicate the fruits of saving grace. They needed discipline. How were we to discipline individuals who were not members? How can you put someone outside the membership who is not part of the membership?

At that time, the answer seemed to be – separate the sheep from the goats within the congregation. In other words, close off communion and make the Table a members-only event. If we did that then we could discipline the people who were a part of the communion table and what...treat the rest as unbelievers? No, that wasn’t going to work. Thankfully, many within the congregation knew that proposal didn’t smell right and we never made it that far. The consternation over this issue caused me to take a four week sabbatical for study. I wanted to solve this dilemma. The answer came in a most startling fashion.

I thought the answer would come by searching all of the NT commands and separating out the ones addressing Christian living in general and the ones addressing Christian

living within the church. But what I found was that I had an unchallenged presupposition regarding the nature of the church. I honestly believed that the local church was an institution. Instead, I discovered that the church is a spiritual entity made up of all believers who have been called by Christ and joined to His Body. No one joins the church. They are joined to the church by Christ.

This means that church membership is the result of Divine initiation. Christ joins people to His church. Church membership needs to be treated differently than I have treated it in the past. I have often spoken of “membership requirements.” When I speak of these requirements I mean that there are certain things a person must do or believe before they can become a member of this church. The only requirement necessary for membership in Christ’s Body is signs of life – evidence that the HS has regenerated the person bringing them to spiritual life. How can we forbid anyone entrance into our fellowship and allow them all its privileges gives evidence of being a fellow member of Christ’s body?

Church membership is more about affirmation than it is about initiation. We are not initiating members. Instead, we are interested in hearing their story of coming to faith in Christ and affirming a work of God in their life. We desire to walk beside them on their journey. We will teach them, edify them, equip them, confront them, admonish them and do whatever else we are commanded to do in the NT for them. That means a person may indeed come into our fellowship not thinking like us, not believing like us, not looking like us, but loving Christ like us. They must be welcomed. To treat Statements of Faith and Membership Covenants as initiatory rites is too narrow and contributes toward the fallacy that the local church is an institution.

Both John and Paul agree that Christ initiates a kind of fellowship when he administers his Divine call. “God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Cor. 1:9). John goes one step further when he says, “that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3). John says that once we are called into fellowship with the Triune God we are simultaneously called into fellowship with one another. The saints that gather on Sunday morning are a fellowship. There is both the vertical and the horizontal aspects of this fellowship. Peter may even be saying the same thing when he writes, “having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart” (1 Pet. 1:22). One of the ends accomplished by purifying the hearts of humans is a kind of sincere brotherly affection. Built into the salvation plan is a body of believers that exists for sincere brotherly love.

All you need in order to truly fellowship with our congregation is a sincere love for Christ and a desire for the sincere brotherly love that comes from other believers that has been generated in you by the HS.

While membership within any given local church needs to be held less formally, participation within that local body needs to be raised higher. In other words, any and every person who professes faith in Christ should be given a fair hearing and their faith affirmed. They need to be welcomed into the body. But once a person is welcomed, they need to be clearly taught and held accountable for living and loving the way true Christians live and love.

We need to bring up a generation of believers who will be like Barnabas. A man named Saul, who had wreaked havoc on the church, was making claims of conversion and seeking to join himself to the other believers who gathered for fellowship. You can imagine the fear of those Christians. Was it only a ruse to get in and then kill them? Could it possibly be a genuine conversion? Barnabas became the man in the middle who attached himself to Saul and then attested and affirmed the nature of Saul's faith to the fellowship. We need this kind of activity. We need people who will attach themselves to newcomers and hear their stories and then affirm them in their faith and attest it to the rest of the congregation.

Let us agree that God establishes the membership of his church. Our job is to simply affirm people in their faith and walk with them on their journey. All believers are welcome here. Our question of newcomers is not "are you a Baptist?" but, "are you a part of Christ's Body?" They can answer "no" to the first question and answer "yes" to the second. "Yes" to the second should be all that is necessary for being welcomed.

Paul said in 1 Corinthians 10:14-17 that there is only one bread and all believers have eaten it. There is only one cup and all believers have drunk from it. There is only one body and the many believers are members of it. Why? Because the cup that we bless and the bread that we eat symbolize a participation in the body and blood of Christ. If you are a lover of Christ, then you are welcome here. The Table is for you. The teaching is for you. The friendships are for you. The admonition and discipline are for you. The prayers are for you. The fellowship is for you. You are a member of Christ's body and we affirm that.