

Membership in the Church and Churches of Christ (1 Tim 3.14-16)

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I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, ¹⁵if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of truth. ¹⁶Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.

Introduction

Because of the possibility that we might join an assembly of churches, it is fitting today, the day of our annual family meeting, that I speak on the theme of “membership in the church and churches of Christ.” Since membership is implicit and not explicit in Scripture, we should review the process of biblical thinking that leads to the conclusion that it is the duty of every Christian to join a local church, *and* that it is the duty of every local church to join *in some way* with the wider community of churches. I have two points: membership supported in principle and membership explained in principles; then the same package is unwrapped further with some concluding implications and applications.

1A. Membership supported in principle (cf. the 3Os of order, ought, and obey)

What is the argument for membership in broad outline? How can it be summarized neatly and concisely? It is simply this: when the duty we have to do all things in the life of the church "in a fitting and orderly way" (1 Cor 14:40) as we "ought" (1 Tim 3:15) is combined with other particular duties such as “obey your leaders and submit to them” (Heb 13.17) the net result is the duty of membership.

In other words, the duties given to us by the Lord Jesus Christ inescapably imply membership for good organization and proper functioning of His church. That is it. It is that simple. The church cannot function in a fitting and orderly way in observing the sacraments, ministering by gifts, fulfilling the Great Commission, ordaining officers, and submitting to pastoral instruction without having a clearly defined membership structure. These duties (sacraments, ordination, giving, mission...) are like dots on an artist's canvas. The principle of order fills in the lines between each dot, and the sketch that results is a sketch of local church membership as a Christian duty.

Moreover, this line of thought cannot stop with the individual local church because the local church is a local expression or manifestation of the church that Jesus is building over the centuries and across the face of the earth. It is incumbent on us to embrace the family of God throughout the world. This is for the sake of fellowship in the communion of the saints and it has an important bearing on how the church carries out her role as the **pillar and buttress of truth** (1 Tim 3.15). But it cannot be willy-nilly; good order calls for discernment in the attachment (by process) of a local church to other churches.

2A. Membership explained in principles

We can summarize some of the key principles needed to fulfill our role as the pillar and ground of gospel truth. These principles not only explain membership but they also deepen the support for it.

First, there is the need that the church have godly leaders. That is the clear context of this entire chapter of 1 Timothy 3. Note how the qualifications focus on mature godliness. On one hand, a leader is not to be a novice: **He must not be a recent convert** (3.6). On the other hand, he must have a seasoned and stable walk with God: **an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife,**

sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable...gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. ⁴ He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive (3.2-4).

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Second, all the leaders are to be men of the truth in a “lived out” way. That is how they all meet the requirement of being “apt to teach” or **able to teach** (3.2). Consider how the requirement of being able to teach is engulfed by practical matters, not theoretical. In other words, the teaching ability in view is not formal, academic, or as they say, pedagogically qualified. Instead, it is teaching by example and through conversation. They are to be men of truth in a lived out way by advancing truth with love and edifying speech (Eph. 4.25; Col. 4.6).

But notably, third, there is the important distinction to be made between a ruling elder and a pastor-teacher elder. It is the pastor-teacher that has the work of the word and prayer in a unique way. It is his labor in life: **Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching** (1 Tim 5.17). In general, we can say that the requirement for this office has a more formal side without it being heady and academic.

Fourth, the bond of leaders and flock is fundamental in fulfilling the duty we all have to confess a good confession. It honors our Lord when we follow in His steps and emulate His conduct. Thus, in 1 Timothy 6.11-14, we can identify a bond between the flock and Timothy, which applies to all of us in the present time, the time between. It applies to every flock and pastor: **But as for you...Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness.** ¹² **Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.** ¹³ **I charge you in the presence of God...and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession.** It is the duty of both pastors and churches to confess a good confession with encouragement from the example of our Lord before Pilate. We do this by the dutiful use of God’s appointed means of grace.

Accordingly, we have a partnership that ought to include hammering out matters of truth for life as part of one-anothering love: we are to speak the truth to one another in love for mutual edification by our speech (Eph 4.25-32). This will involve iron sharpening iron at times and over time (Prov 27.17). Even in the clashing of swords, we are to have speech that is gracious (Col 4.6). We should not back away from this or run away from it because of pride and fear of exposure; gospel answer-giving ought to begin in the household of faith as a base for mission.

Furthermore, fifth, we cannot separate our duty of confessing our faith from our global mission per the Great Commission of Matthew 28. Teaching all Jesus commanded has an international dimension for He commands that we teach the nations (28.19). So we have a partnership in the advance of the gospel (Phil 1.12) and in its defense (Phil 1.16). Iron sharpening iron applies here as well in the worthy walk Paul calls for when he says, **Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel** (Phil 2.27). Striving for the faith has to include striving after the goal of one-mindedness regarding the best possible understanding of the gospel that we can attain as a life-long pursuit in our Lord’s school of life-long learning. Remember, true discipleship, true learning involves give and take dialogue.

This larger dimension of the communion of the saints is how the major confessions of Christian faith came into being. There is much that lies behind our affirmation today that God is one essence and three persons, and that Jesus is fully God and fully man such that we ought to never divide the person or confound the natures. These come from ancient historic creeds that were burned into the corporate conscience of the church for the centuries by the heat of debate (Nicea, 325, Constantinople, 381, and Chalcedon, 451). It took many years to hammer out the conclusions. From these debates, we have much good fruit with many mistakes and dead end roads. We must learn from the work of the Spirit in the life of the church over the ages. We need historical awareness and openness; these go with open-minded humility. We need a learning

spirit looking back at the creeds of yesterday and looking around at the confessions of faith of today. This work may be neglected by extremes such as mysticism (I do not need the people of God and I am not limited to the Scriptures to learn the will of God) and pietism (I do not need the people of God, the church, or the means of grace; I can walk with God on my own). We fail from the git-go when we go down the deeply subjective and overly emotional roads of mysticism and pietism. These approaches spring from the noxious root of asserted human autonomy. 3

Sixth, and finally, there is an important subjective aspect to keep in mind. We are to take up both types of membership with loyalty to the conscience. It is a sin to go against your conscience. That applies to matters of doctrine and practice on which we have agreement as a local church and it applies to how we pursue truth and life in some kind of agreement with a body of churches. In this connection, it is perverse for a prospective pastor to suppress his conscience on matters of truth and practice in order to be ordained by a denomination and to thus “get a job” in a local church.

Therefore, as a bottom line, good order, in combination with the call to confess a good confession, locally and internationally, calls us to attach ourselves with other churches in the best ways that we are able *with a clear conscience* in order to spread the gospel (Phil 1.12) to the ends of the earth (Mat 28.19-20). Of course, attachment of a local church to a denomination or group of churches must follow good order and have as its primary goal the advance of clearer and clearer confession of the truth for the teaching of the nations, which is ultimately for the glory of Christ the Lord of the nations.

Applications: membership is practical, vital, and essential

1) Membership in the church and churches is practical

Paul gave Timothy directions on how we ought to conduct ourselves in the church (1 Tim. 3:14-15). Note the down to earth nature of this passage. Christians have specific duties in God's household; there is an "ought" of conduct. We have obligations. There are responsibilities there waiting for us to take them up (they are outlined in this book and in the NT). Nothing is ethereal or invisible regarding these obligations. They relate to conduct *in the church* of the living God. You may know that you are part of the heavenly Jerusalem, but this is not talking about duties you have in heaven; it is not talking about invisible duties of invisible saints to other invisible saints. Membership brings with it an *emphasis on responsibility* that causes us to relate in specific ways with other people, and yes, that means with other sinners. It is an important Christian duty in relation to the assembly of saints and the means of grace.

A local church is an expression of the church of Christ (the universal, invisible body of the elect) in a particular geographical location where elders are appointed. To strengthen disciples and encourage believers, elders were appointed *in each church* at Lystra, Iconium and Antioch (Acts 14:21-23). These elders are given to strengthen and encourage the saints in their walk of discipleship by faith. The saints have the down to earth responsibility to learn from elders they own as their own, to submit to them, and to do that in regular gatherings for worship (Heb 10.19-25; 13.7, 17).

In this light, you should be able to anticipate the answer to this question, "why do I need to join a church when I am *already* a member of the invisible church of the called out ones?" The answer to this question is that *obedience to the Risen Lord Jesus is not invisible, ethereal and intangible*. Instead, it involves the duties of *local* church membership. Clearly, it is seriously inconsistent to claim membership in Christ's universal church and deny membership in the local expressions of His church. It is a matter of following Him. His sheep hear and follow His voice.

To the question, “why join a denomination?” the answer is similar. We cannot fulfill our international mission as the church of Christ to the nations without some kind of wider fellowship of churches. In Acts 15, we have record of a gathering of elders from different places in order to advance the gospel among the Gentiles, or for our emphasis, among the nations. Acts 15 is a key that grounds having Presbyteries, determined by down to earth geography, in which elders from different churches work together to clarify the gospel and mission.

2) Membership in the church and churches is vital

It is vital for the spread of the gospel. Let us compare two perspectives on the church: it is **"the pillar and foundation of the truth"** (1 Tim. 3:15) and it is **built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone** (Eph 2:20). In Ephesians, the apostolic *word of God is the foundation* on which the church is built. But in First Timothy, the *household (the church) is the foundation* of the truth. The pictures stand in marked contrast. Different things are being emphasized in each passage by the building imagery.

The truth that the church holds up (under its pillars) reveals the meaning of the contrast. It holds up the mystery of godliness (1 Tim. 3.16), which at its core refers to the shift of the gospel from Israel to the nations (we know this from Rom 16.25-26; Eph 3.6). This mystery is the truth that is pillared by the church. *Therefore, the point is that the church exists to hold these truths up to the world!* On one hand, the church is founded on these truths in that God’s word brings the church into existence and guides her steps (that’s Ephesians 2:20). On the other hand, the church is the foundation for these truths in that the church holds them up to the nations in witness and confession (that’s 1 Tim. 3:15 and the good confession of 1 Tim 6.13).

To hold up the truth in the best way possible, the church in a given location must labor more and more to clarify and improve her confession. But this cannot be done in an orderly fashion if there is no definition regarding who makes up the church, if there is no membership roll. Moreover, we have the duty to confess a good confession as the Westminster Reformed Church. To do that, we have to have discussion and dialogue to work out details. Whose confession shall we confess? It is not the confession of any one of us. The church confession is a collective confession upon which we agree. Such agreeing is the backbone of our covenant relationship to one another. All is to be done decently and with good order, and this necessitates a defined membership with good and reasonable policies.

For example, we confess the doctrines of grace as a matter of covenant. It is a matter of integrity for us as a church. If some attending with us wanted a 4-point Calvinist minister, we could not allow that. Why could we not allow that? Fundamentally (as the household of God), we could not allow that *because of our covenant with one another* to confess a good confession. It is *a matter of our word and of loyalty to each other in seeking to honor Christ*. Just as the marriage covenant is ultimately with God, likewise, our church covenant is ultimately with Him (recall the covenant triangle).

Accordingly, for any change on what a pastor must profess is a change in our confession to the nations. For such a change, we would have to negotiate our way there by study and due process in an effort to keep covenant with one another and with the Lord. A clear testimony of grace is what we seek to hold up on pillars to the nations. It is a serious matter and it demands conduct that is orderly. Such order requires a membership roll, which defines who makes covenant and who may vote on group decisions regarding accepting new members, office holders, budgets, and changes in the requirements of office-holding.

3) Membership in the church and churches is essential...in guarding the gospel

To guard the gospel there must be a system of checks and balances in place. To guard the gospel, we must screen and guard the membership in order to screen and guard the eldership.

Fellowship with a presbytery provides a balancing principle for elders in relation to elders of other local churches. This fellowship helps in matters of discipline and doctrinal study. In order to join such a fellowship, the membership must make a corporate decision by voting (thus, must define who may vote per a membership roll, a list on a register, a list of registered voters). 5

At the core here is the basic fact that doctrinal instruction and gospel proclamation belong to pastor-teachers in local churches. That they must be *duly appointed by the people of the local church* is shown to us in the fact that the qualifications of ministers are put into the hands of the people (per the lists of qualifications for ministry, 1 Tim 3.1-10; Titus 1.5-9). Order requires a way to make decisions as a corporate body; it requires voting. But who has the right to vote? Can anyone vote, *anyone* who drops in at the time of a business meeting? No. For good order there must be a defined membership that has the privilege and responsibility to evaluate and appoint ministers of the word. Having a membership, a responsible membership, is orderly and *guards the gospel by wise appointments to gospel ministry through ruling and teaching elders*.

Therefore the lines are filled and the dots are connected: the practical, the vital, and the essential stand together as a unit. Thus, your practical duty to guard the gospel and spread it far and wide cannot be fulfilled in an efficient and orderly way unless you are on a membership roll in a local church pursuing faithfulness. It cannot be fulfilled in an efficient and orderly way unless you all (unless we all) do our best in good conscience to join *in some way* with the wider community of churches.

May we fall down before the majesty of Jesus Christ, appointed by the Father as the Lord of all things, ruler of the nations, and Head of the church; may the Holy Spirit enable us to worship Him with ever growing love and devotion; to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be all glory now in the church and forevermore in the kingdom of heaven, amen.