

Membership in the Church

(by Bob Pulliam)

There are some today who believe they can be members of Jesus' church without affiliating themselves with a faithful local group. There may be any number of reasons for their wanting to do this:

- Avoid responsibilities associated with membership.
- Avoid discipline sure to be exercised against them for error from which they do not want to repent.
- Avoid the need to financially support the Lord's work.

Their justification for this is the idea that the Bible does not say one must pick a congregation and settle down. In this lesson we will see what is involved in membership in a local body of God's people, and see that such is necessary according to the scriptures.

What is "Membership"?...

The idea of "membership" comes out of the scriptural illustration of each Christian as a "member" of the body (church - Rom 12:3ff; I Cor 12:12-27). The concept of membership is that of a larger unit made up of smaller units, each smaller unit working for the benefit of the whole (Eph 4:16). The illustration of the human body (I Cor 12:14ff), emphasizes the need for all of the member to be working together. Obviously, one cannot do that if he is not a member of the body (church).

Who May Be a Member?...

Such is determined by the head of the body (Eph 1:22f; 4:15f; I Cor 12:12). A clear implication of this illustration is that one who does not follow the instructions of the head cannot be a member of the body. Lesson seven will consider this aspect more thoroughly.

What is Involved in Membership?...

Jn 15:1-8 Connected to Jesus to bear fruit, yet local church is only connection (see from Acts onward).

Acts 9:26-28 Join oneself to the body as a fellow laborer.

I Cor 6:19f Remain pure as one who belongs to Christ.

I Cor 11:18, 20, 33 We are to come together "as a church", "in one place", waiting for one another.

Eph 4:16 Every part does its share.

Heb 10:24 Consider one another to stir up love and good works.

Heb 10:25 Not forsake "the assembling of ourselves together".

Heb 13:17 Obeying those who have the rule.

Must I Settle Down with One Group?...

This is a common question, and while the Bible does not bring it up in so many words, it is clearly answered. Paul was concerned with finding God's people and committing himself to a work (Acts 9:26ff). Why?... The passages implementing the illustration of the human body speaks louder than words (Rom 12; I Cor 12; Eph 4:16). One cannot be of benefit to the

local church when he is running all over creation visiting various congregations. One must be present in the body to be of benefit to the body. When we read the epistles of the New Testament, they clearly indicate a static group in one locality, each of whom was to have made a commitment to the work. Such passages speak of them gathering together as a church (I Cor 11:18; Heb 10:24f); disciplining a brother in error (I Cor 5); and certain men who are shepherds over the flock (church) (Acts 20:28; Heb 13:17).

Placing Membership...

This terminology has been rejected by some as unscriptural. No one is ever said to have "placed membership" in the New Testament, and therefore such terminology is to be rejected. By the same token we never read of a "gospel meeting" in the New Testament. Have you read of "business meetings" in your New Testament? What about "baptistry"?

Placing membership is actually a terminology based on sound scriptural principle. It is the same thing that Paul assayed to do in Acts 9:26ff. How is one to be a member of the local church without making such known? Just because one is a member of the universal church, and moves into a locality, such does not offer automatic deposit of commitment to a local group. One should let brethren in a locality know of his intentions that all might work together in an understood relationship. This partnership is called "fellowship" in the New Testament.