

Is Church Membership Optional?

By Stephen Pribble

“Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves” (Hebrews 13:17)

God has given us His inscripturated word, unchanging, written in the Bible; He commissions the preacher to expound and apply that word to the situation facing us, driving it home in our lives as the carpenter drives the nail. The preacher speaks for God, because God has spoken in the Bible; His voice resounds with the familiar “Thus saith the Lord.” The church has the responsibility to listen, and to evaluate everything heard in light of God’s revealed truth.

We will consider the curious modern phenomenon of the unattached believer. This none-too-rare species fancies himself somehow to be a member of the universal church, but not of the local church. Like Joseph of Arimathea, he is “a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews” (John 19:38).

Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit the Apostle exhorts his readers—recent converts from Judaism—not to turn back from Christianity, their new-found faith, to the old, comfortable ways of their apostate religion. For these brave souls, embracing Christianity had involved great sacrifice and pain—being cast out by family, friend and community, cast out of the temple and synagogue, cast out by a religion that by this time, through its accommodation and compromise, had become officially recognized by the Roman Empire, and driven to a fugitive band of unproven men and women who possessed no real estate and clung only to the promises of God. Over and over in the book of Hebrews we find strong warnings to these recent converts not to turn back, not to forsake the truth of Christianity at any cost. In our text the Apostle orders these new Christians, “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves.” It is to these two commands of Scripture—obey and submit—that we will direct our attention. What do they mean, and how can we obey?

There was a time when I was convinced that formal church membership was something churches had only because of tradition, that it had no biblical basis whatever. I was sure this was so because, after all, wasn’t the early church

primitive and pure? (A widespread and unchallenged assumption.) Weren't those early Christians free from all the modern entanglements that bedevil us? Surely they wouldn't have had something so problematic as church membership at that early age! They didn't even have the benefit of computerized mailing lists. Everything was so blissfully simple then!

Of course there are many problems with the whole idea of church membership, at least with the careless way it is so often practiced today. One author has written,

The typical church membership roll includes names of persons who may have left the congregation years ago and are presently attending another church or no church at all. Once a person has been baptized into a local church of a particular denomination, he generally remains a Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, etc., regardless of whether he ever attends church again. To help mitigate the embarrassment and to avoid the difficulties entailed in proper biblical oversight, modern churchmen devised the idea of an *inactive roll*. This improvisation further diminished the value of a church roll by constituting the legitimate status of "inactive Christian," one who is supposedly beyond the scope of church discipline.

But let us not miss the unmistakable divine requirement in our text, "Obey them that have the rule over you." It is evident from two other occurrences of this striking phrase in this very chapter (vv. 7, 24) that ecclesiastical leaders—not familial or civil—are in view. It is the elders of the church who have been given the responsibility to shepherd the flock of God under their pastoral care, to exercise proper spiritual oversight (I Peter 5:1-2). This involves ruling over the affairs of the church. As His ministers they rule in Christ's stead. As we submit to their lawful rule we are actually obeying Christ.

But someone objects, "I'm not a member of any church. Is it not then the case that no church has the rule over *me*? This Scripture cannot apply to me." I answer that Hebrews 13:17 assumes what *should* be the case for every Christian; it presents the norm for the Christian life. Would not every true child of God who understood the implications of this verse *want* to put himself in the place where it was possible for him obey this plain apostolic command? It must be remembered that a person is blessed to the degree that he obeys (Psalm 119:2).

Many Christians cringe at the idea of church authorities having rule over them. After all, wasn't our nation forged out of the wilderness by self-reliant, self-made men? Some of that early "rugged individualism" has permeated into our psyches, and consequently we do not take well to the idea of submission to authority. We like to think that we have gotten to where we are in life by our own power, thank you, and we really do not need to submit. But submission is a biblical concept. We must obey them that have the rule over us in order to be in submission to Christ.

How do we obey? The apostle clarifies this command by the added words "submit yourselves." Submit! The very mention of the word makes the hair on the back of our necks stand up. Submit? Why, that's demeaning! That implies inferiority, that someone is over me. Inwardly I recoil at that idea, but it's scriptural. Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself voluntarily submitted to the Father. The loving wife submits to her husband. Is Christ in any way inferior to the Father? Is the loving wife in any way inferior to her husband? Not at all! Yet both submit out of obedience. In like manner we have an obligation to submit to the lawful authority of the church if we are going to be obedient.

Let us take note of three Psalms which speak of the blessings of the church. "How amiable are thy tabernacles, O Lord of Hosts! My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of the Lord: my heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God.... For a day in thy courts is better than a thousand" (Psalm 84:1-2, 10). Here, the Psalmist expresses his desire for intimate fellowship with the living God. God has placed this longing deep within the human heart, and it cannot be filled by anything else besides Him. Sometimes we get very busy trying to fill that yearning with material things or pleasures or relationships, but we find that nothing else can satisfy this basic human need. Where is it to be met? In the church, the place where God's presence dwells (I Corinthians 3:16). A day in the courts of the Lord is better than a thousand spent anywhere else. It is fellowship with God that gives perspective to life.

In the words of another Psalm, "Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised in the city of our God, in the mountain of his holiness. Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, is mount Zion, on the sides of the north, the city of the great King" (Psalm 48:1-2).

Here we find that the church of God is likened to a city. This is the city spoken of by our Lord Jesus Christ when He said, "Ye are the light of the world. A city

that is set on an hill cannot be hid” (Matthew 5:14). Christ likens His followers to a city which is set on a hill. The church is “Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God” (Hebrews 12:22-23, NIV). It is that spiritual reality and fulfillment of which David’s city was a type.

Why would God’s people not want to come into the City? Why would they want to stand afar off? Why are they content to be “closet Christians”? Why don’t they identify with God’s people? A national poll taken a few years ago found that a great percentage of the people in our country claims to be born again. And yet, why are not our churches full? Why do so many professing Christians not want to come into the City, to become part of the visible church of God? Something is amiss!

The Psalmist says, “Lord, I have loved the habitation of thy house, and the place where thine honour dwelleth. Gather not my soul with sinners, nor my life with bloody men: In whose hands is mischief, and their right hand is full of bribes. But as for me, I will walk in mine integrity: redeem me, and be merciful unto me. My foot standeth in an even place: in the congregations will I bless the Lord” (Psalm 26:8-12).

“Lord, I have loved the habitation of thy house”—can you truthfully say that? Do you love to be with God’s people? Or is it somehow a chore, a routine, an empty ritual? For the Christian there is nothing quite like the joy of fellowship with those of like precious faith. After all, what do we really have in common with unbelievers? But we have *everything* of real importance in common with fellow Christians. If you are more inclined to spend time with Christ’s enemies than His elect, something is surely amiss, for the Christian desires regular fellowship with other Christians.

Consider these words of our Lord: “Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my

Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:15-20).

This section includes almost a word-for-word restatement of what the Lord said to Peter on an earlier occasion: “...whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:19). The Greek and Hebrew languages, in which the Bible was written, have separate pronouns for expressing second person singular and second person plural; our modern English idiom does not. This sometimes causes confusion. Some time ago a friend of mine called on the telephone and said to me, “We’d love to have you come visit sometime.” After I hung up I got to thinking, did he mean me alone, or my whole family? That is the ambiguity of our language. But this statement of our Lord is not ambiguous. In chapter 16, Jesus addresses Peter alone as the representative of the church, using the second person singular pronoun: “Whatsoever *thou* shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” But in chapter 18 He uses a different pronoun, the second person plural: “Whatsoever *ye* shall bind on earth....” Here He addresses all His disciples, and by extension, the whole church. He tells them that collectively they have the power to “bind” and to “loose.” These words were commonly used rabbinical terms which meant “forbid” and “permit,” respectively. The idea is that actions are either forbidden or permitted in terms of the expressed will of God revealed in His law.

The thinking of modern Americans has been greatly clouded by the “situation ethics” generally accepted today, even in many churches. Many people today are convinced that certain wicked deeds may sometimes be right under certain circumstances. Not so with God! As the prophet of old so vividly put it, “Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil” (Isaiah 5:20). Our Lord intends that His church exercise the “power of the keys” in the authoritative preaching of God’s Word and the lawful exercise of church discipline, admitting penitent sinners into fellowship with the living God, and forever banning the impenitent from His holy presence.

Verses 19 and 20 are often regarded as a quaint reference to a small group prayer meeting: “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” While there is truth to that idea, it is not the primary meaning of the verses in context. The context is that of church discipline. When a church court in session pronounces sentence upon a

church member convicted of unrepentant sin, Christ promises actually to be present in their midst. So long as their judgment is true to Scripture, the court actually passes judgment in Christ's stead! Note that it is a majority of a lawfully constituted court of the church—two or three gathered in Christ's name—that pronounces sentence. Such awesome power is never vested in any church leader acting for himself alone. (If this biblical requirement were generally followed, there would be far fewer scandals in the church.)

Of the three God-ordained agencies of human government, the family, the church and the state, only the church has the authority before God to pronounce the sentence of excommunication upon an unrepentant sinner, saying in effect, "You will be forever damned unless you repent. Unless you get right with God, you must never entertain the notion that all is well with your soul. Unless you repent of your sin and come back into fellowship with the Judge of all the earth, you stand in dire danger of eternal torment in the lake of fire." The church is calling upon the heavenly Judge to honor the church's word, which God promises to do. While God reserves for Himself the right to execute final judgment in heaven, in His wisdom He has given the church the responsibility to pronounce temporal judgment upon earth. The highest punishment given to the state is that of coercive force—the iron sword of capital punishment—but the highest punishment given to the church is the sword of the Spirit wielded in excommunication, which says, "Unless you repent, unless you come back to God on *His* terms, you are going to be eternally damned."

The Westminster Confession of Faith suggests the supreme importance God attaches to the church by its insistence that outside of it, "there is no ordinary possibility of salvation" (25:2). Some, as the penitent thief on the cross, may come to saving faith in Christ but through providential hindrance never have the opportunity formally to join the church prior to death. But certainly such a case is the exception rather than the rule. That is why the Confession uses the word "ordinary." Outside the church "there is no *ordinary* possibility of salvation." But how many people in our day think to themselves, "I have a personal faith in God. I'm not a member of any church, but there are a lot of hypocrites there so I'm not going to join." So they live their life blindly convinced all is well with their soul.

A few years ago I was acquainted with a lovely elderly Jewish lady. She began to attend a certain church, and was even permitted to partake of the Lord's

supper, all the while continuing her lifelong habit of going to the synagogue on Saturdays. She had never come to the place in her life where she was willing to submit totally to this demand of our Lord. She was unwilling to renounce her apostate religion and be baptized into the Christian church, yet she was (wrongfully) granted the privilege of taking the Lord's supper on Sundays. Now that represents a very serious but widespread violation of God's order with regard to church membership, because only those who are part of the visible church, who have confessed Christ as their Savior and Lord, who have submitted to the ordinance of baptism and the lawful authority of the church, should partake of the Lord's supper.

While preaching on this subject at a certain church I had occasion to speak with one of the deacons. He mentioned a certain lady who had been attending that church for years. I asked him, "Has she ever taken the step of joining this church?" And he said, "Well, actually no, she hasn't. You see, she is involved with..." (and he named a certain parachurch evangelistic ministry whose workers have a standing policy of never mentioning their church affiliation to inquirers). He continued, "She feels her ministry with that organization would be hampered if she had a tie to a particular church." I said to the deacon, "That's incredible! You mean she feels she can actually serve Christ better by *disobeying* Christ?"

The Bible commands, "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves." This does not mean to obey in some vague way, simply giving lip service. You cannot obey those empowered to rule in Christ's church if you never join. You simply cannot submit to the church's lawfully-constituted leadership unless you become a member. You could never be *excommunicated* if you had never been a *communicant* member to begin with. In our church, whenever we observe the Lord's Supper, the minister invites "those in good standing in any evangelical church to participate in the ordinance." What a generous invitation to be invited right into the very presence of Christ! The Lord's Supper is a fellowship meal only to be given to faithful saints who have properly submitted themselves to church membership, for it is required that all things be done decently and in order (I Corinthians 14:40).

Since the church itself is held in such low regard today, little wonder church membership is not highly regarded. Many civic organizations or professional associations have much higher requirements for membership than the church. In how many local civic clubs could you remain a member in good standing

while never attending or paying dues? That civic organizations should have higher standards of membership than the church of Jesus Christ is truly a shame. For no other organization has the power of the keys, the power to admit people into heaven or ban them from the presence of God.

This attitude spills over into evangelism. There seems to be the widespread feeling that it is the *parachurch* agencies, not the church, that are really fulfilling the Great Commission, that if you want to give your money where it will achieve *real* results, you must give it to one of the parachurch ministries. This is because there is a general misunderstanding that the Great Commission involves only persuading individuals to “invite Jesus Christ into their life”—to walk down an aisle, sign a decision card or speak with a counselor who will show them a few verses from the Bible, pray with them and give them assurance of salvation. But is this all there is to evangelism? No; far more is involved. Analyzed grammatically, it is evident that the Great Commission is primarily a command to *make disciples*. The church is sent forth into all the world to make disciples of every nation on earth. This is accomplished by two specific means: baptizing and teaching. Thus, part of the Great Commission involves baptizing—receiving men and women into the visible church through the God-ordained sign of initiation into the covenant. Obviously, only the church has the lawful monopoly on this. God never gave that authority to individuals, families, independent mission boards, the state, or parachurch organizations. Therefore, if men and women who profess to become Christ’s disciples are not being baptized into the church, the Great Commission is simply not being carried out. Only the church, not the parachurch agencies—as worthy as some of them might be—is ordained by Christ to carry out the Great Commission. It is the church—not the parachurch organizations—which has been specifically established by Christ. Remember His words, “I will build my *church*” (Matthew 16:18).

Is church membership, then, a necessity, or is it somehow optional (“I can join if I feel like it”)? Let’s put it another way: Is obedience to Christ a necessity or an option? This question must be asked today because many people have the mistaken idea that to be a Christian all they must do is pray a simple prayer and then they will be forever saved. No particular transformation may ever be evident in their lives. They may never be able to give up any pet sins. They may never have any desire to read their Bible or attend church regularly. They may never exercise spiritual leadership in their family or have a credible Christian witness. They may never amount to anything for Christ. But that’s all right (it

is thought) for there are two levels of sanctification: Christian and Super-Christian! Not all Christians must become obedient to Christ. Not all must deal with sin. Not all must read their Bible or attend church regularly. Those things are only for Super Christians, those who have attained a higher level of spirituality.

But is this what Scripture teaches? Not at all! The Apostle John wrote, “If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth.... He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (I John 1:6, 2:4). Thus, the Scriptures know nothing of a Christian who will not give up his sin, who will not keep God’s commandments. Those who refuse to bring their lives into conformity with the will of God place themselves in mortal danger of eternal damnation.

Is church membership optional? For the Christian, who is obligated to live his life according to every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God, it is only necessary to determine: Does God’s Word require it or not? What does our text say? “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves.” That is pretty clear, isn’t it? There is no getting around the fact that the disciple of Jesus Christ is under solemn obligation to submit obediently to the lawful authority of Christ’s church. Submission to lawful authority—whether familial, civil or ecclesiastical—is not a popular concept these days, but it is what God requires in the interest of a well-ordered and prosperous society, and the church must begin to preach this doctrine again or face God’s righteous fury.

By way of application, let me suggest four courses of action. First, it is absolutely essential that you put yourself under the proper authority of a local branch of the true church which has been instituted by Christ. The true church may be identified by three marks: the faithful preaching of the whole counsel of God, the proper administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s supper, and the consistent practice of church discipline. A church that fails in any one of these three areas is not a true church.

Second, transfer your membership, if necessary, to a church possessing those three marks. You may have to travel some distance at a great deal of personal inconvenience to find one. You may have to move to another area at a cut in pay. Are you ready to make the sacrifice? Obedience to God demands it.

Third, if you move to another community, transfer your membership right away. How can a church exercise proper spiritual oversight over a member out of its bounds? What if there is no local branch of a true church in a community? Then the Christian simply should not move to that community. Some time ago a newsletter writer was asked, “What should the Christian do who lives in an area where he cannot find true worship of the Lord? It is not economically feasible to move.” His answer: “That’s what Lot said. And Mrs. Lot, too. But they eventually moved. Rapidly, as it turned out”!

Fourth, evaluate the way you are directing your mission dollars. Do the organizations you support have a proper scriptural understanding of the church? Are they accountable to a church, or only to a hand-picked board? And do they contribute to the establishing of new churches, or only seek for “decisions”? No organization which does not in some way encourage the establishing of churches is worthy of your mission dollars. Redirect your mission dollars immediately; responsible stewardship demands this.

God’s Word requires, “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves.” Are you willing to live out the implications of this plain command? God will bless you if you do.

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