

# WHAT ABOUT THE BODY OF CHRIST?

## CHURCH MEMBERSHIP WON'T SAVE YOU

### PART I

Being a church member won't save you, but everyone who has been saved by the blood of Jesus Christ is automatically added to the church (Body of Christ). In Luke's story of the coming of the Holy Spirit and the first thirty years of reverberation from that event, he tells about the establishment of the church at Jerusalem. This is his final comment on the founding of that first church: "And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47b).

The question arises, however: Am I really living what I believe about the church? Do I value my own place in that body? Do I value the place of others in it? Do I fulfill my own ministry? Do I affirm my sister's work and support my brother's service to the Lord? Or do I undervalue, distance from and diminish the health and function of Christ's spiritual body?

#### Individuals in Congregation

The two great commandments, according to Jesus, are that human beings must learn to love God supremely and our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:34-40). Yet one of His apostles stated emphatically that there can be no love for God apart from loving our fellowman, no communion with God apart from communion with one another. "We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother" (I John 4:19-21).

This is why the New Testament never envisions individual believers apart from the church. The universal church that contains all the saved from every nation and language and age. These sisters and brothers serve a very practical purpose in their connectedness to one another. In the language of Paul: **"We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body — whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free — and we were all given the one Spirit to drink" (I Corinthians 12:13).**

It is this sense of a Spirit-created unity among saved persons that moved one writer to call the birth of the church the "final miracle" of Pentecost. "Next to the transformation of persons," he claims, "the second greatest miracle is oneness with others who have been transformed." Thus he defines the church as . . . the fellowship of those given by Christ to be to each other what He has been to them, so that together they can be to the world a demonstration of the new humanity He 'died' and lives to make possible. When He performs the miracle of His love in us, it is then that a character transformation begins which makes it possible for us to love unselfishly. The church as it was meant to be is made up of those people.

Christian fellowship is not the superficial social event the world sometimes signifies in our churches these days. Neither is it some mystical association that exists in the mind of God but is without practical consequence to us. It is the space-time nearness we have to one another, the purified interactions we share with one another, the mutual concern we have for one another's welfare and the practical involvement we have with each other to encourage the living out of the things we say we believe.

It is as if the best answer to the question "How do I become a Christian?" were essentially the same as to the question "How do I become an artist?" or "How do I become a surgeon?" One should be able to say, "Go to the community of people already about that task to learn from, observe and imitate them." **Reading manuals and learning the rules isn't enough. One needs to be able to go where there are experienced, competent and wise practitioners of the art. There is a discipline and craftsmanship to this process that develops newcomers over time. One can't simply follow his feelings but has to be initiated into a highly specialized skill like brain surgery or sculpting or spirituality over time under the oversight of skilled practitioners.**

Fellowship begins in the fact that we are **"baptized by one Spirit into one body" (I Corinthians 12:13)**. It is affirmed when we see one another across the table of Christ and **"discern the [one] body" (I Corinthians 11:29)**. It is manifest to the world when we live in unity, harmony and love for one another. Skilled practitioners who have come to know God and whose lives are being lived in the power of the Holy Spirit are the best persons to train novices in the art of holiness.

By virtue of God's presence and activity within it, the church is greater than the sum of its human parts. It is the living body of Christ. His spiritual body? Yes, but His corporeal presence as well. He has no eyes to see, feet to approach, mouth to speak, or hands to serve this generation of humankind, unless we see them in their true situation, go to them in their distasteful settings, speak to them with our stuttering mouths and serve them with our own hands. Occasional flashes of brilliance or showing up at just the right time or doing something that genuinely makes a difference will be God's activity through us.

### **We Need Each Other**

The biblical notion of fellowship presumes that we will come to understand that we need one another. The business of being a Christian is not finished instantly by being baptized or eating the Lord's Supper or even in achieving some notable victory over a besetting sin. It takes time and cultivation, setback and renewal, effort and maturity. It is the work of God to bring all these things to completion in the context of a functioning church. The church is God's crucible for refining those who come to Him through Jesus.

William Willimon was once invited to preach at an inner-city church. The service was much longer than those to which he was accustomed — about two and one-half hours long that day. When it was finished, the exhausted chaplain of Duke University asked the church's pastor, "Why do these people stay in church so long?" The answer he received is revealing about the nature of the church and what it means to be part of the Body of Christ.

"Unemployment runs nearly 50 percent here," the preacher told Willimon. "This means that when our people go about during the week, everything they see, everything they hear tells them 'You are a failure. You are nothing because you don't have a good job, you don't have a nice car, you have no

money.' So I must get their eyes focused on Christ. Through the hymns, the prayers, the preaching, I say to them 'That's a lie! You're royalty! You are citizens of the kingdom of God!' It takes a long time for me to get them straightened out because the world perverts them so terribly."

**It's true! In one way or another on every day of your life, the world is trying to squeeze you into its mold. It wants you to adopt its world-view that refuses to acknowledge God and rejects the authority of the Word of God. It wants you to think its thoughts, adopt its values, and live its lifestyle. And the world has dominance over many of the delivery systems that carry our culture's messages — movies, music, literature, and the like.**

So what is the hope of Christians? The church — and I remind you that I am talking not just about Sunday assemblies so much as I am talking about a comprehensive experience of celebrative worship and small-group sharing, uncompromising truth and unrelenting grace, shared struggles and common triumphs — must exist as a counter-culture that preserves its identity while surrounded by a hostile empire ruled by an evil prince. We tell and tell again the sacred narratives that tell of our origins and carry our beliefs. We lovingly initiate our children into these stories and explain their meaning and application to them. In our texts, songs, and prayers, we remind ourselves that the world's account of reality is a lie and that Christ's gospel is the truth.

For, as I have often said before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. But our citizenship is spiritual. **Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends! (Philippians 3:18 - 4:1).**

### Conclusion

In this message, I have tried to make a positive case for the importance of the church as God's primary medium for calling Christians to live the things we say we believe. Yet I must be candid enough to tell you that I have had my moments. I have been disappointed at someone's hypocrisy and saddened by my own failures. I have been frustrated to the point of wondering "What's the use?" about the church. But I can tell you with

absolute honesty that I have never really lost sight of how important the church is in God's plan and to my own life. And I have watched others go through this same dilemma of wrestling with what they believe about the church versus what they see in the church.

For example, I have a dear friend who was thinking through this why-bother-with-the-church question. She was thinking about giving up on the church. Things didn't seem to be getting any better where she was. Who needs the hassle, right?

From her personal experience, she was dismayed over the disunity among people who claimed to be children of God. One person takes offense at what another says. There is periodic grumbling that seems to break out in every church. And there's the isolation of whole congregations and even groups of churches from one another — complete with angry challenges, caustic remarks, questioning of motives and judgments.

Oh, and there was the matter of hypocrites that bothered her. Where do they come from? People who say one thing and do another. People who pretend to be something they aren't. People whose Sunday behavior speaks of pious devotion to God but whose weekday conduct is that of a reprobate. It confused her and angered her that she was always running into such folks.

Maybe the worst thing for her was the sense of betrayal she was experiencing. Everybody goes through tough times, and she had tried to be there for others in their low moments. But where had they been for her lately? Her life had been no picnic during the past few years. And some of the people she had considered close personal friends had turned on her. At the very least, they were nowhere to be seen at the moment.

It always seemed, though, that nobody hesitated to ask more of her. When something went wrong, they were always on her doorstep. They were always expecting her to bail them out of problems she hadn't created. Whether the issue was money or griping about someone else in their group or personal crisis, somebody was always asking for something. That sort of thing gets old, don't you agree?

On top of all these grievances, there were doctrinal issues that kept cropping up around her. Is the gospel that hard to grasp?

Can't people understand the difference between its core truth and their personal interpretations and hang-ups? They kept fighting over such petty things. All the while, the world around them was going to hell in a handbasket!

So she was thinking about just giving up on the church. Throwing in the towel. Renouncing it as a lost cause.

You and I have known people who rejected the church for these very things. And it has been hard for us to be very critical of them, for we've all had our moments of discouragement that bordered on despair.

What did my friend decide? Did she give up on the church? No. You'll be pleased to know that she didn't. Why? Because Jesus went to Calvary and died for it.