

### WHY GO TO CHURCH?

This week I was talking to a pastor and he asked me how I would address a problem. He has a man attending his church, who had served as a deacon in another church. The man refuses to join the church, claims that he does not believe in church membership.

We have so individualized the faith that we think we are the center of it all. And I love songs like "When He was on the Cross I was on His Mind," but we need to be careful that we don't take this idea to the extreme. Scripture says that Christ loved the church and gave his life for her. It is the church for which Christ died and he died for us as individuals because we are part of his church and not the other way around.

It is impossible to be a Christian and not be a member of a church. To be called of God and converted means that we have been brought into the church. And when the Bible talks about church, it is almost always about the local church. We cannot make the claim that I am part of the universal church and that is all that I need.

We are to regard our brother as more important than ourselves and to look out for their interests according to Paul in Philippians 2. In First Corinthians the church is told to put someone out of the church because of their immorality. You can't do these things if you are not a member of a church, you cannot withhold membership or impose discipline unless one is a member of the church.

While we Baptists believe in the sole competency of the believer that cannot mean we are entitled to our own peculiar, unique interpretation. In 2 Peter, the Apostle was talking about being an eyewitness to the word of God, Scripture. And he says: 2 Peter 1:20-21 "But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." What he means by prophecy here is Scripture. We must be careful that we conform to Scripture instead of making it conform to us.

Many treat the church like a social club. They find certain elements of church life to be personally edifying; advice how to have a happy home, entertainment for their children in the children's programs--something to add to the piano lessons, the ball games and clubs that add to a well-rounded personality for our children. Others treat church like a community center, a place where they can see their friends and catch up on community gossip.

Some may say, so, isn't that what the church is? The answer is a loud NO! The word church is related to something that humans did not invent and that humans do not have a right to define. Our word "church" and the Scottish word "kirk" and the German word "kirche" comes from a Greek word, kuriakos which means "belonging to the Lord." It is related to another Greek work ekklesia, which means a gathering or an assembly of persons. Church is an assembly of people who belong to God.

The church is "the people of God." That term has a rich history. When we read the Old Testament, we find that God raised up a people. He chose them. He called them by name and made them his. They did not gather under an Oak tree one day and say, lets start a religion and we will worship the one true God. God called this people the nation of Israel.

In the New Testament, the people of God is expressed in the institution of the Church. Jesus declared in Matthew 16 that He would build his church, his assembly of people who belonged to Him, and the gates of Hell would not prevail against his Church. We need to understand, God invented the church, not us. He sets the standards, not us. He is in control, not us. The church is always a local expression of the kingdom of God and it is made up of born again believers, the redeemed of God in Christ.

Then the writer gives three exhortations based on the fact that we come together as a church to worship. The first exhortation is "let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith." To enter the presence of God was a serious thing and had to be done in the most holy manner. To approach God meant entering God's presence in the temple following strict rules. Formerly only the High Priest could enter the most Holy Place. Now, we have confidence to enter the most Holy Place. The sacrifice of Jesus removed the barriers that stood between God and man. Even the veil of the temple is open to us because Jesus is that veil between us and the Father and he was torn for our sakes. That is why we can enter into prayer directly to God, we have direct access to the throne of God because of what Jesus has done.

We are invited to draw near to God and to each other. We draw near to God as a people and to each other as brothers and sisters. In such a relationship we are one, even when we are isolated and separated from each other. We all share in one act of faith, Christ died for us and his death makes us one in Christ. In other words, we enter into His presence as the Church.

The second exhortation, He said (v. 23) "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful." Faith looks back to the acts of the past. Hope is trust that looks to the promises of the future. Our hope is that there is more to life than mere living and dying. We trust that one day Christ will change us to be like him and we will abide with Him forever. When God makes his promises, he keeps them; we have confidence in God because he can be thoroughly relied on. Yet we need to understand that these promises are not given to us as individuals, but to those who are in Christ, to His body. We have a shared hope, we have common hope.

The third exhortation is (v. 24) "and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds." We who share in one faith and one hope are to cause each other to love and do good deeds. One of the major purposes of Church is to be a place where we are stimulated to live the Christian life. It is not just the responsibility of the preacher but the responsibility of everyone who is a member of a fellowship. We are to specifically help each other to love. It is the same old word for love, agape. To love is the most important Christian obligation and believers are to help each other do it. The church should be a place where a person walks out of a better person than when he walked in. It should be a place where we do not have to pretend how good we are but can be real and receive encouragement and support from one another. One writer said, "It is interesting that this kind of love is a product of community activity, for it is a virtue that requires others for the exercise. One may practice faith or hope alone but not love."

The church is to regularly meet together. Those who are one in Christ, those who share in one faith, one hope, who are called to love one another, are called to live in an active community that regularly comes together to worship, to fellowship, to study, and to encourage one another. Apparently there had been a problem in that church of members not coming to church. The Christian life cannot be lived without the gathering together of Christians to stimulate each other to love and good works. If a person tells you they can worship at home or in the woods or on the lake as well as they can in church, you tell them they are wrong! We must be together.

We are the church. We are an assembly of people that belong to God. We are the body of Christ and our head, that is Christ, has commanded us to gather to worship and pray and study and fellowship and love and lift each other up. We need no other reason.