Chapter Eight

Participation in the local church

**This section deals with our participation in the local church. Let's start by saying that there is a big difference in participation and membership. It seems that ideas about membership vary from place to place and from person to person.**

**First of all, we must discuss what the church is in the local sense versus the universal sense. We know that every saved person is added to the church by the Lord (Acts 2-47). This is because of our relationship that we now have with God and Christ. Since the church is the body of Christ, we being in the church are a part of Christ. This relationship exists because we obeyed the gospel that we heard. We repented, confessed and were baptized in His name.**

**The act of baptism not only washes away our sins, but also places us in the church of Christ. We can only have this relationship because our sins are forgiven. Remember that our sins separate us from God (Isa 59:2). So if we remove sin, we can once again return to a relationship with God. The Bible teaches in several places that baptism is the action that washes away our sins. No other action will wash away sins from the alien sinner.**

**This body of believers is known as the church. This church is the kingdom of God. They are one and the same. As long as sin does not rule our lives, we are members of that body of the saved. Once sin re-enters our lives, then we are separated from God once again. However since Christ is our Advocate and High Priest, we learn that if we once again repent and confess our sins, then the blood of Jesus will cleanse us from those sins and remove them (1 John 1:7-9). Thereby restoring us to a righteous kind of relationship with God.**

**God keeps the membership of this universal church. It is not on paper or stone, but it is written in the Lamb's Book of Life. If anyone's name is not found in this book, they are cast into the lake of fire (Rev 20:15). God keeps this membership and there is no error in it. There are no spots or blemishes or any stumbling blocks. There are no hypocrites or sinners in this membership.**

**Now we need to deal with the local church. Unlike the universal church where God keeps the membership, the local church is geographically located for the benefit of individuals. The local church is set up to represent the universal church. Since there is no government of the church other than Christ, there can be no world headquarters or council. There is no such thing as a home office. Therefore it is the responsibility of the local church to represent the universal church.**

**There are only two times in the history of man that the universal church meets in an assembly. First on the day of Pentecost, those who were baptized were added to the church. They were together for a short time, but their number and persecutions dictated that they go throughout the world to evangelize. The second time will be when the great day of God will bring all to judgement. When that event happens, once again the universal church will be gathered together in one assembly.**

**The local church represents the universal church in the physical realm. Since the true church is spiritual in nature, the only body that can show itself to the world is the local church. God left us guidelines and rules to follow as to how to conduct ourselves. Since the local church is physical, it is in the world. The local membership consists of human beings. Though these humans have obeyed the gospel of Christ, there is still a chance that human error can occur. In some places, this leads to turmoil, in others it leads away from God. People can wear the name "Christian", but not live it. In the same way, churches may wear the name "Church" but not actually be recognized by God. But other churches can recognize them, though they have fallen away from the truth.**

**By this we see that one can be a member of the local church but not be a member of the universal church. We see that someone can deceive himself or herself into believing that God accepts them, because the local members accept them. This can lead us into a false sense of security. We could be losing our souls and nobody is telling us.**

**Where do we meet? In the first century, they met in the synagogue or the temple at first, and then they had to start meeting from house to house. They would meet in public places and in schools. They would meet alongside the rivers or out in the fields. They would come together any place that they could arrange. The Bible mentions several people who had churches that met in their houses. The writers of the New Testament letters usually wrote to churches, people, or Christians in certain areas.**

Romans 16:5 (NKJV) Likewise greet the church that is in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who is the firstfruits of Achaia to Christ.

Galatians 1:2 (NKJV) and all the brethren who are with me, To the churches of Galatia:

**The idea of a "church building" did not come until many centuries later. For ourselves; we like the idea of coming to the building to worship God. But as time goes along, we tend to limit the activities of the church to the building. We begin to act in such a way as to convey the idea that: evangelism is limited to the "church building"; that spiritual education is limited to the "church building"; that the saving of souls is limited to the "church building"; that the assembling of ourselves together is limited to the "church building". It is also very convenient that this idea prevails. This allows some people to meet in a particular place and claim a part of that local work (even though, the work is done by only a few).**

Hebrews 10:25 (NKJV) not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.

**There must be a reason for participating in the local church. We need to look at the reasons that church participation is so important. If you refer back to the section of stewardship, you will see the uses of the terms "one another". Let us look at a few of these, keeping in mind the relationship of one another as fellow Christians in the local church.**

Romans 12:5 (NKJV) so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.

Romans 12:10 (NKJV) Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another;

Romans 12:16 (NKJV) Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion.

Romans 14:13 (NKJV) Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way.

Romans 15:5 (NKJV) Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus,

Romans 15:7 (NKJV) Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God.

Romans 15:14 (NKJV) Now I myself am confident concerning you, my brethren, that you also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another.

1 Corinthians 12:25 (NKJV) that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another.

Galatians 5:13 (NKJV) For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

Ephesians 4:2 (NKJV) with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love,

Ephesians 4:25 (NKJV) Therefore, putting away lying, "Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor," for we are members of one another.

Ephesians 4:32 (NKJV) And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you.

Ephesians 5:19 (NKJV) speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord,

Ephesians 5:21 (NKJV) submitting to one another in the fear of God.

1 Thessalonians 4:18 (NKJV) Therefore comfort one another with these words.

1 Thessalonians 5:11 (NKJV) Therefore comfort each other and edify one another, just as you also are doing.

Hebrews 3:13 (NKJV) but exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.

Hebrews 10:24 (NKJV) And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works,

James 5:16 (NKJV) Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.

1 Peter 1:22 (NKJV) Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart,

1 Peter 3:8 (NKJV) Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous;

1 Peter 4:8 (NKJV) And above all things have fervent love for one another, for "love will cover a multitude of sins."

1 Peter 4:9 (NKJV) Be hospitable to one another without grumbling.

1 Peter 5:5 (NKJV) Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for "God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble."

1 John 3:23 (NKJV) And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment.

**Once again, read these in their context. Remember that most of the New Testament was written to members of the Church. As we read these verses we can see the important relationship that we have to our fellow Christians. We also see our responsibilities and we can see what benefits we are to receive from them.**

**Now let us look at the benefits of participation in the local church. This can best be described by looking at the benefits of the early church.**

Acts 2:42-47 (NKJV) And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. {43} Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. {44} Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, {45} and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. {46} So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, {47} praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.

**These people were privileged to have had the Apostles to guide them. The Apostles were also babes in Christ in the beginning, but they had a Helper. They had a Comforter. This was the Holy Spirit, which Christ promised He would send. The Holy Spirit guided the Apostles into all truth. As the Church would spread and grow, the Apostles would not be able to give this guidance, so spiritual gifts were given to faithful men and women. As the word was put into printed form, the spiritual gifts would no longer be necessary. We now have the result of all of this effort; the Bible.**

**These people had the privilege of fellowship with the saints. There is no better place in this earth to be than with the saints of God. This is either in the local assembly or as Christian’s gather together to study or socialize. I would say that it is rare to have churches today with the same characteristics that this early church had.**

**These people also demonstrated the first worship services. They shared in the breaking of bread and prayer. The Apostles Doctrine was being taught. We can only assume that singing and giving were included in these earliest services because the letters of Paul later taught them.**

**There was an effective outreach upon all the people. Everyone kept felling a sense of awe. This quality is lacking in so many "Christians" today. We should be in awe that the creator has chosen us for His own. We should be amazed to look upon the glory of God and know that He will give us that glory. We should be in awe of His power. And we should be in awe of the power of the blood that was shed almost two thousand years ago.**

**These people had a common cause. It was like a great big family fulfilling various duties. There were the breadwinners and the bread makers. There were the teachers and there were the students. There were the workers and there were the thinkers. All of these had a common goal. All of these knew that they had a part and were not about to let their brethren down. Seems like the church today does not have this same attitude.**

**These people had mutual assistance. Like the big family that they were, they were looking out for the needs of the entire family. Along with these, there are other benefits of participation in the local church.**

Acts 20:7 (NKJV) Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight.

**By example, the designated time for the organized worship service was the first day of the week. That day is Sunday. It does not matter if it is in the morning or evening. It only matters that we meet on Sunday for this purpose. The local church has the options of when to gather together. The people who place their membership with a local church are subject to that church. Some time ago, some churches started meeting twice on Sunday. This is one of our traditions. There is nothing wrong with meeting twice on Sunday. It even has some additional benefits. When members absent themselves from services, they do themselves harm and deprive others of their encouragement.**

Matthew 18:15-17 (NKJV) "Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. {16} "But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' {17} "And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.

**The church is the pillar and ground of truth. Sometimes a member might not represent that truth. If this happens, the rest of the local church must respond. First comes the exposing of error or the reproving a fault. If that does not cause the person to return to the truth, then several members should go to the erring member. Finally, the entire church must know that this person is in error. Because an individual member represents that of which it is a part, this person is a blemish on the local church. If this person is a blemish on the local church, that person is also a blemish on the universal church. We must distance ourselves from this person in the sight of the world. We must publicly acknowledge that we do not approve of this persons actions, and that we will not tolerate error.**

**All of this discipline is meant to turn a sinner from destructive ways and save their souls. If that is not done, the purity of the church is of supreme importance. The purity of the church must be maintained either by repentance or withdrawal of that erring person. Church discipline should only be used on those who are living in error but still claiming church membership. I've seen churches withdraw from people who stopped being a member by choice. This is not discipline. It is a shame that it got to that point. I've seen withdrawal actions take place six months to a year after is should have been done. This is wrong. Church discipline should be swift and decisive in order to be effective.**

1 Peter 5:1-3 (NKJV) The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: {2} Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; {3} nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock;

**Some congregations are blessed to have godly elders. Anytime that you associate with a local church that has elders who are serving God, and not themselves, you have a wonderful benefit. Every church should develop its membership so as to prepare men for the office of elder. The membership should support faithful elders. The local membership should also have the courage to terminate an unfaithful elder. The truth must always come first.**

**As we said earlier, membership is not participation. Think about this. What if the other members were like me. What if the preacher was like me. What would people say about this preacher. Let’s explore some possibilities.**

**1. The preacher did not show up so we won't have any preaching this morning.**

**2. That preacher was not prepared for his lesson.**

**3. That preacher did not know what he was talking about.**

**4. That preacher has not been seen for three weeks.**

**5. That preacher only shows up on Sunday morning.**

**6. That preacher showed up wearing jeans and a T-shirt to the church services.**

**7. through 88. You fill in the categories.**

**On the other hand, what about this.**

**1. Every member is here this morning and we have a wonderful crowd.**

**2. Every member is prepared to worship God.**

**3. That member sure knows their bible and how to teach it.**

**4. That member is here every time the door is open.**

**5. through 88. You fill in the possibilities.**

**God requires that we participate in the local church. We must be active members of our congregation. We must be active in the goal of the church. That goal is the salvation of souls. We must contribute to the work of the church and help in any way needed. We are a part of the church. We are a part of Christ; now let’s act like it.**

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