

Chapter 1

Who belongs to a church?

Let us first consider what people rightly belong to the church. What sort of people does the Lord Jesus Christ make citizens of his kingdom? Any good society requires good citizens. The Bible calls the people who become part of God's kingdom (the church) *saints*. They are his holy ones. They are separated from the world. It should be clear that those living in open sin and who are ignorant of the gospel do not belong in church membership. We should consider four important factors:

1. Christ requires much of those who become members of his church. If much is expected of citizens in earthly kingdoms, how much more is expected of citizens in Christ's kingdom?
2. Every member of Christ's church must experience regeneration. He must be born again.
3. Every believer should be baptised. Baptism is the outward symbol or sign of what has happened inwardly.

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4. God alone is the judge of the real state of the souls of men. The church can only be the judge of the outward fruits and no more.

How do we form right judgments?

The following points will help us form right judgments about who can be part of a gospel church:

1. No one can become a member of the church who lives in open and habitual sin. We must withdraw fellowship from those who claim to be Christians but live in that way. To compose churches of habitual sinners is not to erect temples to Christ but chapels to the devil.
2. No one can become a member of the church who has committed a scandalous sin and refuses to repent.
3. Church members of today should match the description of the members of gospel churches in the Bible. If they do not, the church will not be built up but destroyed. The church members of old were called saints. They were living stones in the house of God. They were justified and sanctified. They were separated from the world. If such requirements are ignored or denied today, it only shows how far the Christian religion has fallen.
4. Church members must openly profess faith in Christ. They must submit themselves to his authority. They must be ready to obey all his commands (see Rom. 10:10;

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2 Cor. 8:5; 9:13; Mt. 10:32-33; Lk. 9:26; 2 Tim. 2:12; Rom. 15:9; Jn. 12:42; 1 Jn. 4:2,3,15).

What is required of church members?

Church members must have a genuine profession of faith. Here are the requirements of such a profession:

1. It requires a right understanding of the gospel. This includes a right understanding of who Christ is and what he came to do. The risen Christ gave his apostles a commission to teach and to preach the gospel. If a person is ignorant of the fundamental doctrines of the gospel, he should not be admitted into church membership. If he is, Christ's church will be defiled.
2. It requires submission to the authority of Christ in the church (Mt. 28:18-20; 2 Cor. 8:5). The first sign of this submission is when a believer is baptised in the name of Christ.
3. It requires self-denial and cross-bearing. Our Saviour taught this to his disciples (see Mt. 10:37-39; Mk. 8:34,38; Lk. 9:23). It is a shame that we do not teach this more clearly in our day. It is often thought that it is easy to become a Christian or that it will cost us nothing. The gospel, however, gives us another account. It warns of hostility, hatred, sufferings, and often even death itself for believers. A person should consider this before making a commitment to Christ. This used to be taught in the early church. In particular, faithful ministers of the

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gospel need always to be prepared for suffering. It is not consistent with the gospel to escape sufferings by sinful compromise.

4. It requires conviction and confession of sin, and a trust in the way of deliverance by Jesus Christ.
5. It requires the steady performance of all spiritual duties. This includes the public and private worship of God as well as personal ministry to others.
6. It requires a life free from sin that is scandalous in the eyes of the world and the church of God (1 Cor. 10:32; Phil. 1:10).

Who should be excluded from church membership?

The following people should not be admitted to church membership: (1) those who do not understand the gospel; (2) those who persecute Christians; (3) those who worship and serve idols; (4) those living in scandal; and (5) those who will not submit to the commands of Christ in the gospel.

We cannot improve on the example of the early church. They preached the gospel to all they could. They rejoiced that multitudes came to hear the Word. However, if anyone attempted to join with them, they were diligent in examination and instruction. They asked serious questions about a person's conversion before admitting him into membership. They knew that admitting unqualified people into church membership ruins all the beauty, order and discipline of the church.

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Members of the visible church are properly called ‘saints,’ ‘the called’ and ‘the sanctified.’ These were the titles used in the New Testament church and we should follow this same pattern. We can tell if those who claim to be Christians are hypocrites by listening to their words but also by looking at what they do, which will reveal what they really think.

Scripture never teaches that Christ received unqualified people into his church. No one can deny that members of the church should be holy. To claim to belong to the church while living in sin is a denial of the gospel and sinful rebellion against the rule of Christ.

What can we learn from church history?

The early church faced persecution from outside, but it still preserved discipline inside. We need to imitate those early churches. We should not be like the churches during the times of the ‘Christian’ emperors. At this time, all things began to rush into apostasy. When the Roman emperors embraced Christianity the outward peace of the church was secured, but the care and diligence of the churches in admitting members was largely lost. The rulers of the church began to think that glory consisted in *numbers*. They wanted to increase their own power and wealth. In a short time, the population of whole cities and provinces were admitted into churches. This corrupted the church in doctrine, worship, order and rule. It ended in the great apostasy. The church became confused with the state and the result was the ruin of the church in all its order and beauty.

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Even in the Protestant Reformation the issue of church membership was not clearly addressed. The great Reformers worked principally against the false doctrine and false worship of Rome. They believed that false doctrine and false worship had filled the people with darkness and they were correct as far as they went. However, the reformation of the church in its membership was not attempted at that time. It was only when Calvin came to Geneva that the purity of the church began to be addressed. In most other places, the churches continued largely as they were under the old papal system.

A progressive reformation was God's holy and wise plan. This served for the good of the church. If the Reformers had started with church membership, their efforts to reform doctrine and worship would have slowed down. In our day, the process of reformation is continuing. Churches are still conforming themselves to the New Testament pattern.

The central message of this book is that church membership should be biblical. Christ is the head of the church, and we are his body (1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 2:22; 1 Cor. 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 8:5). Sadly, many church members are not what they ought to be. Many are hypocrites, and we must make honest judgments.

How do I find a good church?

We must also ask how a Christian can find a good church. What if he belongs to a church that does not have a pure membership? What if his church does not even care about biblical standards for church membership? Here are my answers:

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1. A Christian should only stay in a church if he is being edified. Does the church build up the believer in the faith? No man is obliged to remain in the fellowship of a church if he is not being edified.
2. A Christian should leave a corrupt church. It is corrupt if the lives of its members dishonour the gospel. It is corrupt if it fails to represent the holiness of Christ and his doctrine. It is also corrupt if it does not, cannot, or will not reform itself. In such cases, it is the duty of any Christian to withdraw from the membership of that church. He should do this as peacefully as possible. He must then find a true church.

To withdraw offers a testimony against the weakness of such churches. They bring dishonour to the gospel. All believers must first be the loyal subjects of their Lord and King. It is as justified to withdraw from a church over the issue of membership as it is to withdraw over doctrine or worship. It is better for believers to depart from corrupt churches than to stay to the ruin of their own souls.

How should the church care for those who cannot be received into full membership?

This category includes children who come from Christian homes but who are not yet believers. It also includes servants (employees) or other household members who might attend church with a Christian family, but who do not know the Lord. I believe that the church and its officers should seek to take

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these under its spiritual care. It is, in fact, a great evil if they do not. The duty of the church to these people consists in prayer for them, instructing them according to their ability, advising their parents (in the case of children), visiting them in their families, encouraging or warning them, and preparing them, if converted, for joining the church. They are excluded, however, from participation in the special privileges of the church.

Churches need to be careful not to neglect this duty. Neglect arises from factors such as: (1) ignorance of this duty; (2) not enough officers and teachers in many churches; (3) the lack of a sense of duty in parents and masters; and (4) failure properly to value the great privilege of having such people under the church's care.

Churches need to have enough officers to attend to all their duties. Families must be dedicated to God. Where there are godly officers and strong families, you will find church-order, usefulness and beauty.

What is the special duty of a church in admitting members during a time of great persecution?

In the days of the apostles and the early church they were careful not to admit members who might betray them. However, they did not allow concern for their own safety to keep them from admitting genuine Christians. This is the rule in which we should walk. In times of persecution, the church is obliged to receive sincere converts into its care and fellowship. They prove their sincerity if they profess faith in the truth of the gospel and are ready to suffer for it. They prove their sincerity

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if they flee from scandalous sins and submit to the rule of Christ in the church. If a church refuses to admit them, these new converts might be cast off into superstition and idolatry. In the end, how will a church be able to explain such a refusal to the great Pastor of the whole flock?