

During the course of the last three Bible studies our attention has been focused on the issues of Christ's Headship in the Church and the government that He has ordained for His Church as its Head. In connection with the issue of the government of the Church we devoted the last study to a consideration of the Presbyterian form of church government as set forth in the Word of God.

One of the issues that comes under the subject of Christ's Headship and the Government of the Church is that of the believer's responsibility to be in submission to Christ and to the spiritual government that He has ordained. Since Christ is Head of the Church there must be submission to Him.

1. **Submission to Christ is an integral part of the Christian life.** The believer needs to come to terms with the fact that a spirit of submission is integral to the very nature of the Christian life. For example, the attitude of submission is clear proof of the infilling and control of the Spirit. See Eph 5: 18 -- note the command to be filled by the Spirit, which essentially is to be under His control. V.v. 19-21 show how the Spirit's control affects the believer: in worship, v.v. 19, 20, and in the area of submission within the Church. This is a general statement that believers are to be in submission to one another. Every believer is to see himself as being part of the whole body and is to put away all behaviour that would divide. No believer is an island unto himself in isolation from other believers, 1 Cor 12: 21 - 26. All believers are part of the body and every member is important. Thus, there must be a crucifying of self-centeredness for the benefit of the body.

2. **Remember that we owe submission to Christ in the light of His submission in order to accomplish our salvation.** Submission should be given joyfully & willingly, in the light of all that Christ has done for us. His sufferings for us are the greatest argument for yielding to His rule. Scripture itself uses such an argument as it presents the call for submission, Rom 12: 1, 1 Cor 11: 3. Note the words, "*the Head of Christ is God.*" Stated at the beginning of a passage where "submission" is the basic theme. To be understood, not as teaching that Christ is inferior to the Father with regard to His personal essence, but as teaching that Christ was submissive to His Father in His mediatory capacity. Christ as Mediator was under the headship of the Father, in total submission to the Father, in His mediatorial function of saving His people from their sins, Phil 2: 6-8. Thus, since the One by Whom we profess to have been saved, saves us as the result of His own submission to the Divine will, surely it is incumbent upon us to submit to His authority!

3. **This submission to Christ is required of us as members of His Church.** Various Scriptures teach that believers are "members" of Christ's body or church, Rom 12: 4, 5; 1 Cor 12: 12-27; Eph 5: 30, "*we are members of His body.*" The word for "member" is *melos*, meaning "member" "limb" "part of the body." Clear from such Scriptures that the analogy of membership in the body is designed to inculcate submission. Just as the physical head on the human body is the seat and source of control for the body, so Christ is the One Who is in command over the Church with all its members. Being given the privilege and blessing of being members of His body brings with it the responsibility to be in submission to the Lord.

One of the areas for submission is the issue of membership in the visible and local church. Is it Scriptural and essential to hold official membership in a congregation?

I. Church membership is a reflection of the union among believers in the body of Christ and is therefore Scriptural.

Believers are not only joined to Christ, they are also joined to one another, Rom 12: 5; Eph 4: 25. The context is that of being truthful with our "neighbours." Word for *neighbour* refers to anyone near to us; a fellow man. But the "neighbour" under scrutiny here is our fellow-believer, and the motivation for mutual honesty among believers is that they are members one of another -- that there is an intimate union between them. See the earlier context, v. 16. "*Fitly joined together...*" = to bind together, to fit or frame together. See ch 2: 21 where it is used of a building. There is a union of parts fitted to each other. "*Compacted*" = to bring together, to knit, to join. Idea is of bringing persons together, to reconcile them, to unite them in friendship. So the Church is figuratively a body composed of many limbs or members; literally it is a company of believers intimately united.

This intimate union between believers is by virtue of their mutual union with Christ and their mutual indwelling by the Holy Spirit, 1 Cor 12: 12, 13. Note v.12 -- part (a) of the verse establishes Paul's use of the analogy of the human body as a portrayal of the Church. But note part (b) "*So also is Christ...*" i.e., "so also is the body or the Church of Christ." Paul expresses it as he does for the simple reason that all believers are joined together to Christ, and by virtue of their union with Him are in union with each other. Then note v.13 -- this verse presents the proof that there is but one body with many members. By the work of the Spirit in spiritual baptism believers are constituted one body, Ps. 133.

Now on the basis of this spiritual union between believers, there is to be a visible, organic union between them in public assemblies and congregations. Note the following verse -- Acts 9: 26. What is meant by Paul's attempt "*to join himself to the disciples...*"? Word for 'join' literally means, "to glue or cement together" so it has the clear meaning of being one. See Matt 19: 5; Eph 5: 31, where it is used of marriage. Shows the strength of the union -- it is not a mere, loose, connection, but an entering into a very close bond and union. Hence, Paul's desire in Acts 9: 26 was to enter into a most close union and fellowship with the Lord's people in Jerusalem. Moreover, he wished to have a visible and public identity with the church in Jerusalem. See Acts 10: 28 -- though used negatively, the idea of a visible, organic, union is clearly expressed. See also Acts 5: 36 -- these 400 men banded themselves together into a visible group and were publicly identified as followers of Theudas. Hence, by the Spirit's use of the word "join" Paul's desire to "join himself to the disciples" is explained to have been a public demonstration of the close, intimate, spiritual, union that already existed between himself & the disciples. This is what is involved in becoming a member of the local, visible, church.

II. Church membership is based upon the truth that there is structure within the body of Christ

The terms of Scripture make it abundantly clear that there is structure within the body, the "church invisible" as it is termed. Clearly implied by the titles given to the church. It is a "body", a "building", a "temple", a "house" etc. Such names inculcate the clearest impressions of structure and order. A body's parts are not thrown together randomly; a building or a

house is constructed according to a plan, with cohesion and union throughout, 1 Pet 1: 5a. On this basis, church "membership" is but the visible expression of the structure that essentially belongs to the body of Christ.

It must be kept in mind that our use of the term "church invisible" is for a particular purpose -- it is the admission that in the final analysis only the Lord knows the exact number and identity of true believers. But this term "church invisible" does not mean that the church does not have a visible expression. See 1 Cor 1: 1 -- the believers in Corinth are called "the church of God." See Acts 20: 28 where the term "church of God" refers to those redeemed, the true people of God. But Acts 20: 28 and 1 Cor 1: 1 show that the "church of God" has a visible identity. In other words the Church had a visible manifestation and expression in the cities of Corinth and Ephesus, as well as in a multitude of places. Many other Scriptures present the same fact.

The importance of this fact is that since there is an inherent structure in the Church, as indicated by the names given to it (body, building, etc.), then there must be a visible manifestation of this structure in the various congregations. That structure is evidenced by the existence of *government, discipline, church ordinances, and public worship*. Government and discipline especially presuppose "membership." By government we refer to the exercising of the offices of the N.T. Church by fit men. But such men are to be found among those who are in the visible church, which means that there has to be a recognized "membership" from which eligible men are to be elected. See Acts 6: 3 -- how could the church in Jerusalem choose men from "among" them unless there was a structured membership from which such men would be chosen?

III. Church membership is for the purpose of being under the authority that Christ has established for His Church

See Heb 13: 7, 17, 24. Word for "rule" has the inherent idea of *leading, guiding, and governing*. Believers are clearly commanded by the Lord to be in submission to spiritual rulers for the obvious purpose of being led and guided. This is the chief aim of being under the oversight that Christ has appointed -- being guided in your spiritual life. But the receiving of such presupposes "membership", as we term it. How can elders govern and guide the Lord's people if they do not publicly and visibly place themselves under such oversight? That is, by a voluntary, personal, step of public identification with a local church, thereby declaring their agreement with that doctrine and distinctives of that church?

Rev. John Greer