



Keys

to:

Fruitful
Church Membership

David W. Cloud

Keys to Fruitful Church Membership

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“One danger I have observed growing up in a godly pastor's home and now having some years of pastoral experience is that families that are not under the authority, counsel and correction of a pastor can become isolationists in the sense that they develop an almost carnal perfectionism and end up separating from just about everyone who does not align with them on every little detail. This is especially true when they are out from underneath a local church umbrella for a long period of time. I can think of a family I know and love right now that is in that category. They have been so long out from the discipline of local church oversight, they are in danger of never joining a church again and have become a law unto themselves” (Simeon Western).

Introduction

The first edition of the following report appeared in *O Timothy* magazine in 1992 under the title “The Other Side of Separation.” Later we published an updated edition under the title “Grace and Authority in the Church.” In 1999, we changed the title to *Keys to Fruitful Church Membership*, and this edition is a further rewriting and enlargement.

Years ago, I received a letter from a young couple who exhorted me as follows:

“Your book on separation is very good, but you may want to add a caveat that a person must have a better church to separate to before he separates from a church. We were shocked at the liberal doctrines held by the fundamental churches in our city.”

Later they wrote to share more detail about the “liberal doctrines.” Following are things that they mentioned:

“(1) Their former pastor did not teach that women should not work outside the home, and the wife of the associate pastor worked. (2) The church held parties or fellowships on Valentines Day, Halloween, and Christmas. (3) The pastor allowed a divorced person to work in the bus ministry. (4) The pastor failed to correct publicly certain erroneous statements which were given during testimony times and certain (supposed) erroneous statements which were made by visiting preachers. (5) The pastor failed to do anything about missionaries who joked and told stories in the pulpit. (6) Though the church took a stand for the KJV, this man did not think there was sufficient teaching on the subject of Bible versions. (7) The pastor “used humor to break the tension” in his preaching, whereas this one felt that

sober-mindedness required that such levity in the pulpit cease. (8) The pastor seemed to prefer to let God change people about such things as appearance (long hair, ear rings on men, etc.) rather than approach them directly.”

The couple eventually wrote and said they had “separated” from this fundamental Baptist church and from its pastor “because of his liberal teaching on remarriage, women working outside the home and his refusal to correct error.”

It is natural that in any church we will find things with which we do not agree. To practice Bible separation based on the type of things discussed in this letter, is not proper or healthy. These are matters of preference, or, at best, very minor issues. Church members must learn to deal properly with such things or it will be impossible ever to be a happy, fruitful church member.

Another couple left a church because the pastor taught tithing and they don’t believe in it.

Another couple left a good church because some of the women in the choir wore short heels. To them, this is immodest and unacceptable.

Those who leave churches over issues such as this will never be fruitful church members. Recently I heard from a couple who had been in 19 churches in 10 years.

While we are to separate from error, we are also exhorted to submit ourselves to pastoral authority and to exercise much patience and grace in the church. There are many things we can disagree with in a church while continuing to submit ourselves to God-ordained authority in a biblical manner. It’s not always easy to discern what is very important and what is less important, but the Spirit of God will help us. He is the one who has instructed us to “obey them that have the rule over you” (Heb. 13:17) and “endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3).

I know of many who have separated from practically all churches. Many times, these are good people who want to contend for the truth in an apostate hour. Many others, though, are contentious people who simply refuse to submit to God-ordained authority. I praise the Lord for anyone who has a zeal for the truth, but I also believe there are some important lessons in the Word of God that can help us deal with the complex matter of church membership.

The following thoughts can help us to have a more fruitful attitude toward the assembly in spite of the many problems and imperfections we always find there.

These are lessons I have learned personally over the 50 years I have been a church member since soon after my conversion at age 23 in the summer of 1973. These are lessons I have had to re-learn repeatedly, in fact, because the “old man” doesn’t like to submit to authority and is naturally divisive. One of the works of the flesh is “variance” (Ga. 5:19). And I have learned these lessons better over the years.

No Ecumenism or Compromise

Let me hasten to say that I am utterly opposed to ecumenism and spiritual compromise. I realize that New Evangelicals and ecumenists take some of the things we will deal with in this article and misuse them to excuse their disobedience. They speak much of love and grace and liberty, but they take verses on these subjects out of context and refuse to deal with the enormous amount of teaching in the Word of God on other matters, such as rebuking sin and error, contending for the faith, warning about apostasy, and exercising separation and discipline.

In this report I intend to deal with grace and liberty and submission to church authority, but I have no intention to ignore these other issues.

Those who know us will not have to be told this, but I say this for the sake of those who do not know us. For fifty years, we have stood unapologetically for Bible separation. In this instance, though, we are dealing with other important matters.

Keys to Fruitful Church Membership

Please bear with me while I offer several things we must know and do in order to be fruitful members of a New Testament church. I think of these as “keys to fruitful church membership.”

A Vibrant Relationship with Jesus Christ

The first and foremost key to fruitful church membership is a real and vibrant relationship with Jesus Christ.

“Then said Jesus unto the twelve, Will ye also go away? Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God” (John 6:67-69).

“Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me” (John 15:4).

“And now, little children, abide in him; that, when he shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming” (1 John 2:28).

In order to submit to godly pastoral leadership in a right way and to have the spiritual discernment to know right from wrong in churches and to be able to weigh issues properly, one must be born again and have the indwelling Spirit of God.

Many church members who cause unnecessary problems in the church and who injure the welfare of the church do so because they do not have a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. They lack spiritual discernment; they walk after the flesh rather than the Spirit; they are self-willed; they do not know how to submit biblically to godly authority; and they do not care how their actions affect the church.

The Bible warns that God will deal severely with those who harm His churches. “If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are” (1 Co. 3:17). The reason many troublemakers do not fear God’s retribution is because they are not saved.

To be a fruitful church member year after year, one must not only be saved but also must abide in Christ. The individual must walk in fellowship with Christ. When we walk with Christ and have our eyes on Him, we do not get offended at what man does. “Great peace have they which love thy law: and nothing shall offend them” (Ps. 119:165).

This is why some church members throw up their hands and quit or become disgruntled and spiritually ineffective when they witness a pastoral failure or some other serious problem in the church, whereas other church members keep on going for the Lord in spite of every discouragement. They are disappointed when men fail them, but they do not quit or turn aside, because their eyes are upon the One who never fails!

Knowing Christ and abiding in Him is the most essential key to fruitful church membership.

The Importance of the Church

Another key to fruitful church membership is to understand that the church is a divine institution. It is at the center of God’s work in the world today and will continue to be until Jesus returns to catch away the New Testament saints.

The Bible emphasizes that the church is God’s appointed means of accomplishing His plan in this age. Even the most cursory study of the New Testament demonstrates this. There are more than 100 references to the church. This shows how highly the Holy Spirit has emphasized the church, and the vast majority of those references refer unquestionably to the

local assembly, not to a general or prospective aspect of the church.

Men have corrupted churches, but the church is God's plan. The Lord Jesus said, "I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Mt. 16:18). The church is Christ's program.

The church is the house of God, the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Ti. 3:16), and the context of this passage is a church with elders and deacons (1 Ti. 3:1-8).

Most of the New Testament was written directly to churches. And even those portions not written directly to a particular church refer to the church.

The theme of Acts is the planting and multiplication of the first churches.

The Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) were written to instruct church planters.

Even the General Epistles, which are not written to particular churches, have the churches in mind. Hebrews refers to the church in chapters 10 and 13. Hebrews 10:25 exhorts God's people not to forsake the assembling of themselves together. In Hebrews 13:7 and 17 Christians are exhorted to obey church rulers.

The last chapter of James refers to the church. Those who are sick are to call for the "elders of the church."

The final chapter of 1 Peter also refers to the church, in exhorting elders in their duties.

John refers to the church in his third epistle, when he mentions the proud Diotrephes.

The book of Revelation, of course, is addressed to seven churches of that day.

Consider, too, that there is no Bible instruction about the discipline and watch care of Christians apart from the church. There is no instruction about leadership among

Christians apart from the church. The entire life and work of God's people for this age appears in the context of the assembly.

We must also understand what a church is. A proper New Testament church has certain biblical ingredients. It is not merely a group of Christians meeting for prayer and Bible study. Paul wrote to Titus about church work in Crete. The gospel had been preached and believers were meeting together, but that was not enough. Paul instructed Titus that certain things were lacking (Tit. 1:5). Those things were qualified leadership and biblical organization, the things Paul emphasizes in his epistle to Titus.

The very first thing that Paul mentions is the ordination of elders. "For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee" (Tit. 1:5).

We see the same thing in the book of Acts. When Paul and Barnabas raised up groups of believers in various cities through the preaching of the gospel, they were careful to "ordain elders in every church" (Ac. 14:23).

A proper New Testament church, therefore, is a body of baptized believers who are congregated together under the oversight of qualified and ordained pastor/elders and who are accomplishing the work described in the apostolic epistles.

It is clear from Scripture that it is God's will that every believer be a faithful, fruitful member of a sound New Testament church. That is what we see in the first church in Acts 2. Those who were saved on the day of Pentecost "continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Ac. 2:42).

If there is not such a church in an area, the establishment of such a church must be the highest priority. A believer should never be content merely to listen to recorded preaching sermons, or to read sermons from a book, or to

listen to preaching on radio or television, or to meet together with a loose-knit group of believers without scriptural leadership and order.

The reason I have remained a faithful member of a church for 50 years is not that I have found perfect pastors and perfect churches, but it is because I know that this is God's will and anything less would displease Him. It is my understanding of the doctrine of the church that has kept me going in spite of grave imperfections of churches.

No Perfect Church

Another key to fruitful church membership is to understand that there are no perfect churches.

We have mentioned this, but it needs to be emphasized. It sounds like a simple matter, but it is not. It is something that must be relearned frequently.

Even the early churches founded and pastored by the apostles had problems. In fact, there were very serious problems in many of the early churches.

Consider the church at Corinth. The members were carnal and divided. They refused to discipline one of their own although he was living in open fornication with his father's wife! They were taking each other to court. They were getting drunk during the Lord's Supper. They were misusing the spiritual gifts. They allowed false teachers to discredit the Apostle Paul. What a church! Yet Paul was thankful for the grace God had given them (1 Co. 1:4).

The seven churches mentioned in Revelation also had many serious problems, including spiritual coldness, false teachers, and immorality.

Two women in the church at Philippi had to be corrected for being disunited (Php. 4:2).

Paul had to rebuke Peter for his hypocrisy (Ga. 2:11-14).

Paul and Barnabas had a contention that was “so sharp between them, that they departed asunder one from the other” (Ac. 15:39).

Need we go on? There never has been a church that did not have problems, and the simple reason for this is that church members are sinners and churches are involved in furious spiritual warfare.

It is not therefore surprising to find many problems in fundamental Baptist churches today. I have spoken in more than 550 churches across North America and in many other countries, and I have observed the problems firsthand.

When I was a young Christian at Bible College, I saw problems that almost devastated me. As I started my training in 1974, I was almost 25 years old, but I was only one year old in the Lord, and I was shocked at many things. Some 50 years later, I am still saddened by these same things! These were things such as Sunday School promotionalism that turns the church of Jesus Christ into a carnival; too much levity at times in the pulpit; shallow biblical content in the preaching; exaltation of men above that which is proper; quick, manipulative methods of evangelism, and an overemphasis on “decisions” and “prayers” rather than on repentance and regeneration.

Because of issues like these, I left after the completion of my first year of Bible College, determined to attend a different school. The Lord gave me no peace over this decision, though, and within a few weeks I returned and completed my studies.

Looking back, I am thankful for the Lord’s leading, though I did not understand it very well at the time. The other school that I was looking at was Calvinistic and was part of a group that was already proceeding down the path to New Evangelicalism, and I would have faced an entirely different

set of problems--problems possibly even more unhealthy than the ones I was trying to flee.

I still believe the aforementioned issues are wrong, and I try to avoid them as much as possible; but I have also learned some things that have helped me, I believe, have a more balanced attitude toward church problems in general.

We must keep the big picture in focus. Every church has strengths and weaknesses; to focus exclusively on the weaknesses can cause us to forget the strengths. 1 Thessalonians 5:21 says to prove all things AND to hold fast that which is good. We must not “throw the baby out with the bath water”!

There simply is no perfect church situation in this present life.

If you leave a church, you should move to a better one, not a weaker one.

It is a good practice to count your blessings. What are the things that attracted you to the church in the first place?

In spite of the fact that all churches are imperfect, we do not see in Scripture any healthy examples of Christians who neglected the assembly. In fact, those who separated themselves were considered unregenerate. John says, “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us” (1 Jo. 2:19).

Keen Spiritual Discernment

Another key to fruitful church membership is keen spiritual discernment which enables us to distinguish between the important and the less important issues.

Observe the following Scripture:

“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone” (Mt. 23:23).

In Matthew 23:23, the Lord Jesus Christ taught that not all things in the Bible are of equal importance. Some biblical teachings are “weightier.” Everything in the Bible has some importance, but everything is not of equal importance.

Knowing the difference between the two requires a good knowledge of God’s Word and keen spiritual discernment.

This is the lesson of the following passages:

“And I myself also am persuaded of you, my brethren, that ye also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another” (Ro. 15:14).

“Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Ti. 2:15).

“For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil” (Heb. 5:12-14).

Such discernment comes only through a close walk with Christ, diligent study of God’s Word, and the exercise of the spiritual senses to discern good and evil.

Paul told the church at Rome that the reason they were able to admonish one another was because they were full of goodness and filled with knowledge (Ro. 15:14). That refers

to the maturity of their Christian lives and to their Bible knowledge.

It is my conviction that the friends who wrote to tell me that they were “separating” from all independent Baptist churches lacked the maturity to distinguish between the “weighty” matters of biblical truth and those matters that are less significant. Although they lacked such maturity, they were convinced they had better discernment than anyone!

This happens frequently. In fact, it tends to be a characteristic of young Christians. Someone has wisely stated that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. This is one reason why God forbids a novice to be a church leader (1 Ti. 3:6).

The young Christian begins to gain some knowledge of the Bible and the ministry, and suddenly he is convinced that he knows a lot and tries to straighten out everybody else, blithely ignorant of his own serious shortcomings. This happens frequently to young Christians who are in Bible college. They gain knowledge, but often they don't have the life experience and maturity to use it correctly. If they are not careful with their newly found knowledge, they can cause more problems than they solve!

Pastors and churches are to be judged by the Word of God (1 Th. 5:21), but church members cannot do this until they first gain the necessary biblical knowledge and spiritual discernment required for such judgment.

Young Christians, in particular, need to be extremely cautious and patient about exercising judgment against a pastor. Unless the matter in question is something that is very plain in the Bible and unless there are mature Christians who can confirm the judgment, it is wise for the immature Christian to defer to the pastor's greater calling, knowledge, and maturity.

Some of the *weightier matters* of God's Word in relation to churches are things such as sound doctrine, the gospel, Christian love, godliness, separation from error, soul-winning, and missions. Some of the *less weighty matters* are things like promotions, youth activities (unless they are clearly worldly), holidays, and political involvement. Good examples of less weighty matters are the list of eight things mentioned at the beginning of this article: whether or not the church has fellowships at Christmas, joking in the pulpit, etc.

I am not saying that the child of God should ignore the danger of contemporary music or false teaching or unqualified leadership or worldly youth ministries or anything like that. I am not saying we are to be blind to things that are clearly unscriptural.

I am simply saying that not all matters are of equal importance, and we must learn to weigh various issues of church life before the Lord in order to exercise mature judgment.

We see this in Christ's judgment of the churches in Revelation 2-3. The problems He rebuked were of a truly serious nature. He did not rebuke a church for having a church social on Valentine's or a gospel meeting on Halloween. I'm not trying to be facetious. I'm not trying to make light of less important things, but the fact remains that Christ did not treat all church problems with the same degree of seriousness, and we must follow His example.

This is exactly what we see in the church epistles. The problems rebuked by the apostles under inspiration of the Holy Spirit were of a serious nature. The Church at Corinth was not rebuked for allowing a divorced man to work in the evangelistic ministry, but for drunkenness and immorality and carnal divisions.

Conviction vs. Preference

Another key to fruitful church membership is to understand the difference between conviction and preference. Conviction is based upon a clear teaching of God's Word. Preference is not. Preference is a personal opinion. A Christian can have preferences on all sorts of church matters, but he is not at liberty to judge the church on the basis of his preferences and to make them a law for others. This is discussed in Romans 14:

“Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations. For one believeth that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eateth herbs. Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him. Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand. One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it. He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks” (Ro. 14:1-6).

This passage is often misused by ecumenists to support their phony idea of legalism. They claim that it is not right to judge others even in matters of doctrine, but that is nonsense. It is not legalism to cry out against sin, to judge false teachers, to set standards for God's people based on the clear teaching of the Word of God, to demand that Christians obey the details of the Bible. In Romans 14, the Lord forbids us to judge others IN MATTERS THAT ARE NOT CLEARLY TAUGHT IN SCRIPTURE.

Two examples are given: what we eat and how we respect holy days. These are issues that the New Testament does not address. There are no dietary laws for Christians, and there are no holy days that we must keep after the fashion of the law of Moses. These are matters of Christian liberty. I am free to eat meat or not to eat meat, but I am not free to judge others by *my* conscience in this matter or in any other matter that is not plainly taught in the Scripture.

When the Scripture speaks plainly, we must speak; but when the Scripture does not speak, we have no authority to speak. In such matters I am free to follow my conscience and the Lord's leading for my personal life, but I am not free to make my conscience a law for others. That is the teaching of Romans 14.

The things mentioned earlier in this article fall into this category. There is the matter, for example, of holding fellowships on Valentine's, Christmas, and Halloween. Obviously it is wrong to be involved in witchcraft, idolatry, or immorality, but as for the days themselves, they are nothing. Why would it be wrong to have a church fellowship or gospel outreach on October 31, for example, so long as the church does not promote things associated with evil, such as a haunted house or ghosts and goblins? If the church tries to incorporate such worldly things into youth activities, this should be resisted loudly, but if the church is simply having a youth activity on or near October 31 in order to reach the unsaved or for the edification of Christian young people, there is nothing wrong with that.

It is a matter of preference rather than law. Our former church had a Harvest Fellowship at Halloween, primarily to provide an activity to help keep young people away from the evil things that go on in the world then. I see nothing unscriptural about this.

I am not giving a blanket endorsement of the world's holidays. There is much that is evil there. The Cupid of

February 14 is connected with a pagan god of lust, and the Christian must avoid every form of immorality. But I don't believe it is wrong for a church to have a fellowship or some sort of "sweetheart banquet" at Valentine's Day for married couples.

I am convinced that there is freedom of conscience in such matters. These are matters of preference. If a person doesn't want to have any type of get together on such days, he shouldn't have them. He doesn't have to participate in something at the church if his conscience will not allow him to do so, but he shouldn't make his own opinions about these things a law for others when God has made no such laws.

I know some are going to groan when they hear this, but I believe this principle is applicable for certain Christmas practices, as well. We know that the Christmas season originated with Rome. I am as opposed to Romanism as anyone. I have written many books against Rome. Yet while I am sickened at the commercialism and debauchery that often characterizes the Christmas holidays, I don't believe it is wrong to enjoy some aspects of that season. I am convinced there is Christian liberty in many of these things.

Definitely we must not be involved with Santa Claus, which is a combination of a pagan god and a Catholic "saint," but I believe a person can enjoy the social and family aspects of the season without worshipping false gods or committing sacrilege. I don't believe in setting up Christmas trees in the church or having a Santa visit the church, but I don't think it is wrong to have a nativity play and sing some of the Christmas carols that are Scriptural and otherwise involve one's self in activities that do not bring dishonor to the Lord Jesus Christ. Our church has a big gospel outreach on Christmas.

My objective is not to defend Christmas. I am simply talking about one's attitude toward those things that other people or churches do that I might not agree with, but that

are not directly condemned in the Word of God. I am trying to illustrate this with some concrete things that we face in everyday life.

Consider the matter of Sunday Schools and children's ministries. Jesus said we must not forbid the children to come to Him, and Paul said that knowing the Scripture from childhood leads to salvation (2 Ti. 3:15). It is obvious, then, that churches should be concerned about teaching children the Word of God, winning them to Christ, and discipling them. At the same time, the New Testament is silent about children's ministries as such. Therefore, this is a matter of liberty and not law. It is a matter for each church to decide for itself: whether to have such ministries, when to have them, who attends, what is done, who teaches, etc.

I received a communication from a missionary couple that said, "We do not agree with Sunday Schools that separate the children from the families. We do not believe women should be teachers of age segregated Sunday Schools."

This is an opinion rather than the Word of God. There is nothing in Scripture that forbids a church to have a children's Bible ministry. A church has authority to preach the Word to anyone of any age (2 Ti. 4:2). And there is nothing in Scripture that forbids a qualified woman to teach children in the church.

I don't expect every reader to agree with me in all of these matters. I am simply saying that we have liberty in matters not directly addressed in Scripture.

The very fact that each of these matters is controversial illustrates my point. I must be careful that I am not trying to make my own preference and private interpretations laws for others and that I don't judge churches on the basis of my opinions and preferences.

While we must stand for the Word of God, we must also be careful that we not take away God-given liberty and hold our

own conscience up as a law for others. Anything that is not clearly taught in Scripture falls into this category: whether or not a church uses musical instruments, times and frequency of services, evangelistic methods (unless those methods are contrary to Scripture), choirs, children's ministries, etc.

The list is very long. It is a blessing to understand that God has given His people much liberty in Christ and that in such matters each Christian and each home and each church is at liberty to follow the Holy Spirit's leading.

Avoiding Hypocrisy

Another key to fruitful church membership is to beware of hypocrisy.

It is much easier to criticize others than it is to live a consistent spiritual life in my own right. The sin that Jesus reproved in Matthew 7:1-5 is the sin of self-righteous hypocrisy, the sin of judging others for things of which I am guilty.

We must never forget that we are sinners, too. We must not forget that God has been very, very patient and merciful to each of us. We must not forget the long path that has taken us to where we stand today, and how many sins and failings the Lord forgave in order to bring us along in our Christian lives.

To require perfection of others when we have never had any such perfection in our own lives is hypocrisy.

I think of my own Christian life. I think of the early years of my Christian life and what a mess I was in so many ways. It took me months even to decide to cut my long hair or to give up smoking, which are quite superficial things. Even today, after decades of growing in the Lord, I am very far from what God wants me to be spiritually. We are to lay aside the old man and put on the new man, which is Christ. We are to be conformed to the image of the One who has the Spirit

without measure. He is the definition of love as described in 1 Corinthians 13. He is the perfect holy man of Psalm 1.

That is our objective, yet how terribly far we fall short. Each and every one of us!

Let's flee from that hypocrisy whereby we are so quick to judge others about things that we are guilty of in God's eyes, if the truth be known, even if it is perhaps in a smaller measure than those we are judging.

Judging is something we are accountable to do. We are to judge righteous judgment (Joh. 7:24). We are to be good Bereans and prove all things by God's Word (Ac. 17:11; 1 Th. 5:17). But let us be more severe in judging ourselves than others.

Building the Church

Another key to fruitful church membership is to be busy building the church to the glory of Christ.

Churches must be built with much godly labor. This is the theme of 1 Corinthians 3.

“Now he that planteth and he that watereth are one: and every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labor. For we are laborers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building. According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon. For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's

work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire” (1 Co. 3:8-15).

We see that every born again believer is to be a builder of New Testament churches. God’s people are to laborer with Him in His building work. Each has his own divinely-given gift and calling. Jesus Christ is the only Foundation. An individual can build gold, silver, precious stones, or wood, hay, stubble. Every believer’s work will be tested at Christ’s judgment seat for reward or loss of reward.

Churches must be built. It is probably the most difficult work on earth. It is spiritual warfare. A church that has no problems is a church that is not doing right. A church that is striving to please God in all matters is a major target of the devil. There are always people problems. There are all sorts of people: babies and teens and adults and grandparents, spiritual and carnal. Every church has three aggressive, unceasing enemies: the world, the flesh, and the devil. Every church is only one generation away from apostasy, because every generation of children must be born again. There is no time when a New Testament church can relax and rest on its laurels.

It is easier to criticize what others are doing than to do something constructive ourselves, but we are less likely to criticize improperly when we are busy building.

Many church members aren’t actually building. They are spectators, and spectators are naturally critics. They are “Monday morning quarterbacks.”

Before I have a right to “criticize” others, I need to get in the battle and be an effective part of building up the church and furthering the Lord’s Great Commission. If I am bringing people to the Lord and helping them grow, I know how very difficult this job is and how much patience and wisdom is required and how far from perfect our converts are (and we are!).

Those who zealously participate in the work of joining hands with the leaders to build the church for the glory of Christ are invested in the church in a very real way, and they will be less likely to criticize unnecessarily and unwisely and destructively than those who are mere spectators.

The question to ask is this: what am I doing to build the church? Have I dedicated myself without reserve to this important business? If I were to leave, would the church even miss me?

Pastoral Authority

Another essential key to fruitful church membership is to have a right attitude toward pastoral authority.

“Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation” (Heb. 13:7).

“Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you” (Heb. 13:17).

We have looked at the emphasis God has placed on the local church. That emphasis is woven into the very warp and woof of the New Testament and is undeniable. It is God’s will that every Christian be a faithful, fruitful, contributing member of a sound New Testament church.

That being the case, it is not surprising that we are exhorted to obey those who have the rule over us. The verses quoted above are strong; we are to obey our church leaders. They are not to be lords; they do not have unlimited authority; they are not to be obeyed unquestioningly; but they ARE rulers.

Hebrews uses plain language, and I believe it means exactly what it says. Not all Christians have equal authority in this

world. Some are rulers, and the others are to obey those rulers.

The pastors of a church have the major responsibility before the Lord for the teachings, practices, and direction of that church.

The Bible says that church leaders must watch for our souls and that we must not cause them grief for that is unprofitable for us. I believe that this points to the judgment seat of Christ. If I am a grief to my pastor, it will be unprofitable for me at Christ's judgment bar.

The notable exception to this, of course, is if the pastor himself is not obeying the Word of God or is leading contrary to the Word of God and is grieved at me simply for my stand for truth.

In the free eBook *Pastors, Deacons, and Church Member*, we deal with the abuse side of pastoral authority. This is available at the Way of Life website:
<https://www.wayoflife.org/books/>

In light of exhortations such as Hebrews 13:7, 17, I must find a church that is following the Word of God, and I must then obey my leaders in that church. I must support that church in every way possible. That is the will of God for every Christian.

The leaders, in turn, will give an account to the Lord for their teaching and decisions. **THEY HOLD THE GREATER RESPONSIBILITY, AND I, AS A CHURCH MEMBER, WILL NOT GIVE ACCOUNT FOR EVERYTHING THAT GOES ON IN THE CHURCH.**

Obviously, this does not mean that church members are to close their eyes to false teaching and sin, but it **DOES** mean that church members should not try to impose their views upon the church and its leaders. The church member must remember that he is not the pastor of the church. He, therefore, doesn't have the wisdom, the unction, or the

responsibility for that job. He must submit to those who are the pastors and must allow them to make decisions with which he might not agree, submitting himself and herself because God has told him to do so.

The church member will never find a pastor with whom he agrees 100%. Think about it. This would be impossible. The only one with whom I agree with 100% is myself, and sometimes I disagree with myself! Recently a pastor told me that he liked my book *The Calvinism Debate*, but he disagreed with one statement. I replied that I disagreed with that statement, too, and that I should have made myself more clear!

We all know this in theory but the practice of it is often a difficult matter.

I must recognize that if I am ever to submit to a pastor, it will be to an imperfect one and to one with whom I will not agree on all things.

Isn't it reasonable to believe that God will guide the man he has placed over the church? Who am I to try to impose my views on him?

I must understand this if I am to learn to get along in a church and be a fruitful member. God works in this world through our imperfections. This, of necessity, is the way He works in a church.

The friends who wrote to me that they were "separating" from a certain fundamental Baptist church, said that the pastor holds what they believe to be a weak position on divorce and remarriage. By this, they meant that the pastor allowed a divorced person to work in the bus ministry. I take a strong position, personally, against divorce and remarriage. I believe we must preach against divorce, and I don't believe a divorced man is qualified to be a pastor or a deacon, but I don't believe it is wrong for a saved, repentant divorced person to work in the bus ministry. There are difficulties with

any position one might take on this issue, and the more perverted our society becomes, and the more fragmented our families become, the more difficult it will be to deal with these issues.

The problem with divorce and remarriage is not so much whether a pastor believes divorce is wrong; practically all Bible-believing pastors believe this. The difficulty comes in how we treat those who are divorced. Do we allow them to join our churches? I know of one fundamental Bible church that does not allow divorced people to be members. Does the pastor perform weddings for those who are divorced? If so, under what conditions? Do we allow divorced people to serve in the church? If so, in what capacity? Can they be Sunday School teachers? Ushers? Can they work in the bus ministry? Good churches differ in these matters, and I believe this is an example of something in which a church member can submit to his leaders, leaving it in the hands of the Lord.

The pastors will answer to God about these things, and there are many matters like this.

I might disagree with my pastor over his teaching on giving, for example. Some believe tithing is a law in the New Testament dispensation and others don't. I think of a man who makes a big issue of this, and if a church teaches tithing, he will not join it regardless of any other issue. As a result, he is not in any church, having a little "home church" instead, and though he does a lot of evangelism and apologetics he has very little if any fruit.

I might disagree with some of the music in my church. Some Christians don't like any recorded background music to be played during the services; others don't like guitars to be used; others don't like gospel quartets. In my estimation, none of these things are wrong in themselves; it is the character of the music that makes such things right or wrong. I have heard some spiritual recorded music, and I have heard a lot of worldly recorded music. I have heard guitars used in a

spiritual manner as well as in a worldly manner. I have heard spiritual quartets and unspiritual, “showboat” ones.

The point is that there is room for variety in the music program of the church, and I might not agree with all of the decisions that are made. Our video series *Satanic Attack on Sacred Music* deals with this issue extensively:

https://www.wayoflife.org/s3/satanic_attack/

I might disagree over my church’s standards for workers, thinking that the standards are either too strict or not strict enough.

I might disagree over whether or not a pastor has a television and whether or not he preaches against this enough. We would never encourage someone to stay in a church that has low moral standards for workers, if they listen to rock music, for example, or wear immodest clothing, or where the pastor and other leaders watch ungodly television programs and movies and sensual things on social media. I am merely saying that my exact standards might not be enforced by the pastors, and that alone does not mean that I should leave.

I might disagree with how my church conducts its business meetings. A church we were once members of, for example, doesn’t include women in the business meetings. The women can attend if they choose, but the men conduct the business. Imagine such a thing in this feministic society! I am sure there are many who would not agree with this, but it is not contrary to Scripture.

I might disagree with some of the missionaries the church supports.

I might disagree with some of the ways the church finances are used.

I might disagree with the kind of materials that are used in Sunday School, about whether or not promotions are used,

about whether or not puppets or plays or such things are used, about whether or not there is a bus ministry.

I might have problems with how the missions program is conducted. I might not like some of the special speakers that the pastor brings in. I might disagree with my pastor over his involvement in or lack of involvement in political issues. I might disagree with him regarding his dealings with erring members. He might seem too patient or too harsh.

I'm simply saying that there are many things that we must leave in the hands of the pastors, and this is never an easy matter.

In every church I've been a member of, I've disagreed with some things. There is a time to leave a church over things that we believe are wrong, when we have a clear scriptural basis and the issues are important and the direction of the church is set, but we must also learn to put many things into the hands of the Lord and do what He has told us to do: submit to the church leadership and serve the Lord and be fruitful.

The pastors must be allowed to be pastors. They will answer for things that I will not answer for, and they have authority that I do not have. This is not shirking responsibility; it is obedience to the Bible; and it is the path of wisdom and blessing.

We deal with this issue much more extensively in *Pastors, Deacons, and Church Members*, available as a free eBook and in print: <https://www.wayoflife.org/books/>

Grace

Another essential key to fruitful church membership is to bathe all of our judgments in love and mercy and graciousness.

“But speaking the truth IN LOVE, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ” (Eph. 4:15).

“Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort WITH ALL LONGSUFFERING and doctrine” (2 Ti. 4:2).

“Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, IN FAITH AND LOVE which is in Christ Jesus” (2 Ti. 1:13).

“And the servant of the Lord must not strive; BUT BE GENTLE UNTO ALL MEN, apt to teach, PATIENT, IN MEEKNESS instructing those that oppose themselves...” (2 Ti. 2:24-25).

“Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one IN THE SPIRIT OF MEEKNESS; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ” (Ga. 6:1-2).

Some of the things mentioned in the letter from the friends who “separated” from a fundamental Baptist church remind me of these verses. God tells us that we must maintain an attitude of meekness, patience, and compassion when dealing with others about their perceived problems.

The friends mentioned some instances in which their pastor supposedly “failed to correct error in the church.” While it is necessary to stand for the truth and to rebuke sin and error, there is also such a thing as wisdom and patience and caution when dealing with people. You don’t necessarily come down hard and publicly on every problem that arises.

They mentioned the rambling testimony of a new convert. The new convert believed a woman who had recently died went to heaven because of the peaceful expression on the face of her corpse. That’s a weird testimony, to be sure, but I don’t think it is something the pastor should necessarily have corrected publicly. Lack of wisdom can easily turn a slight problem into a large one. Pastors are the ones who have to make those calls.

They mentioned a deacon who testified that “he liked to put God in impossible situations just to see what He will do,” and they seemed shocked that their pastor and the other deacons said “amen” to this. They said this contradicts Matthew 4:5-7, in which the Lord told the devil that we are not to tempt God. But the deacon was probably just saying that it is a great thing to be in a situation in which God must do something special to help us, or something to that effect. I read a little ditty in the *Maranatha* paper some few years ago that said, “When God is going to do something wonderful, He begins with a difficulty; if it is going to be something very wonderful, He begins with an impossibility!” That is probably the idea that the deacon was trying to convey. His way of saying it might have left something to be desired, but this is not a serious matter.

We must judge such things in a spirit of graciousness and patience, always giving the benefit of the doubt and leaving room for people to grow.

They mentioned that the song leader said one night that Satan was the king of this world, and that Christ was not king. They said that since Christ is Prophet, Priest, and King, they felt the title of king is reserved for Christ, but that is not so. Christ is King of kings and Lord of lords, but there are kings many and lords many in this present order of things. Satan is called the god of this world (2 Co. 4:4) and the prince of the power of the air (Eph. 2:2). He is not necessarily spoken of as king of the world, but I do not believe it would be wrong to call him that in light of these verses. He is king in the hearts of lost people.

Again, this is a petty matter that requires more graciousness and spiritual maturity than that which was displayed by the couple who wrote to me.

A pastor has to exercise supernatural wisdom and kindness. This is one reason I have a tremendously high regard for godly pastors who are committed to God’s Word.

They must always walk that fine line between caution, concern, and compromise, between zeal for the truth and patience with the erring. I believe they have the most difficult job in the world. If they make mistakes and fail to do everything exactly as we think they should, we shouldn't be surprised!

How would you do in the pastor's shoes?

We must always season our judgments with grace. Mel Rutter, late Vice President of Maranatha Baptist Mission of Natchez, Mississippi, once told me, "Dave, be as firm as the rock in your position for truth, but as sweet as the honey from the rock in your disposition when striving for truth."

That's good advice, and though I have often fallen short of this, it is definitely one of the goals of my ministry. I want to be a gracious Christian and a gracious preacher. Anything less is un-christlike and wrong.

Standing Back and Looking at the Whole Picture

"Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things" (Php. 4:8).

It is easy to get tunnel vision when thinking about church problems. You focus on the problem(s) so much and so long that you forget what else is going on.

It is good to stand back and look at the whole picture. Oftentimes, this will help you see that though there are problems, there are also great blessings and that perhaps the blessings far outweigh the problems.

Perhaps you will see that your church, even with its problems, is better than any other church in the area, and that you need to stay and do your best to make things better.

Persistence

A final key I will mention is persistence. It is essential to find the church where God wants me and stay there and labor there and pray there until it is very clear that God is moving me.

Persistence! Stay by the stuff! Keep on keeping on!

I heard from a friend in Christ recently who said, “We are still at the church we have been at for the past 30 years, ministering with our children and grand children in many capacities. We pray for them everyday to pass on the godly heritage torch till Jesus Christ comes in death or the Rapture.”

That is a wonderful testimony. I know that this church is far from perfect. This man loves my teaching and has been influenced by it. There are things in his church that he has disagreed with over the years. I recall conversations I have had with him in past decades when he was very discouraged with the direction that the pastor was going in some important matters. But he stayed and prayed and labored and gave, and God has helped the church to stay on the right path. God has used him to help bring this about.

I think of another man that I met recently. He is an old man now, and he has been in the same church for many decades. In former days, the church was pretty strong and was bearing good fruit for Jesus Christ in a relatively dark part of America. But the church became weaker and weaker as the pastors changed. In recent years, the pastor dressed up as Santa Claus for Christmas parties. The deacons weren't biblically qualified. The youth were worldly. The church was a mess. The old man stayed and prayed. He showed me his daily prayer list and prayer routine, and I was amazed at the time he spends in this spiritual endeavor. He is truly a prayer warrior. He prayed that God would send one more revival to his church. Day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year. Things got worse rather than better.

The situation looked hopeless. Finally, though, God brought a man to lead this church into revival. When they called him to the pastorate, he was straight with them about the changes that would have to be made. They agreed, but still, after he arrived and began instituting changes, one of the deacons tried to stir up some of the men to get rid of him. He stood his ground and was helped by the Lord. The deacon and his cohorts left. Those who stayed wanted to follow the pastor's leadership. The first Bible conference they had was a conference on prayer, and the people rallied to the challenge.

There is a time to leave a church, but only the Lord can make this clear. He is the Lord of the church. In leaving a church, the matter should be as clear as when I joined it.

Unless that happens, I stay and pray and labor and seek to have fruit for God's glory and to make my little corner as strong as possible in God's Word.

Conclusion

There is much more that could be said, but I will stop here.

I must add that I am definitely *not* giving a blanket endorsement of independent Baptist churches. There are MANY I would not join because of matters I count too serious to overlook. In fact, I am on the periphery of the Independent Baptist movement and the number of churches I can recommend with a good conscience is relatively small. Some are New Evangelical in principle (whether they know it or not). Some use corrupt Bibles. Some remind me more of a carnival than a church. Some have more of an entertainment program than a biblical one. Some appear not to know anything of old-fashioned Bible holiness and separation from the world and pilgrim Christian living. Some use the world's music. Some practical a man-made program of evangelism that garners large number of false professions. Some have a strutting *Poobah* for a pastor, a man who requires unquestioning loyalty to himself. (The pastor's authority is limited by the Bible, and he is to be proven in all things, 1 Th. 5:21. Further, a biblical pastor is not a lord; he is a humble shepherd, 1 Peter 5:1-5.)

Please understand, too, that I am not trying to quench anyone's zeal for doing right. *We need more zeal for truth and righteousness, not less.*

It is not wrong to try to correct perceived problems in the churches. It is not wrong to talk to the pastor about things about which we disagree. The Bible instructs us to "prove all things" (1 Th. 5:21) and to judge all preaching (1 Co. 14:29). There is a ministry of correction that is taught plainly in Scripture, but I did not set out to address that subject in this article. Here, I am dealing with other important issues.

I am not saying we should stay in a church no matter what is wrong or that we should accept whatever happens. I am

saying, simply, that the church is God's program today and He has promised rewards for faithful, fruitful members of sound churches.

I am saying, don't let anything draw you away from church itself.

I am saying that you should focus on what God has commanded you to do, which is to serve Christ and be fruitful.

We should remember, too, that there are things God's wants to teach you even in difficult situations (Ro. 8:28).

I want to be a blessing to the Lord's churches. The Bible makes it plain that God wants His work to be done through the church. Thus, it behooves us to make a supreme effort to submit ourselves to this institution except in matters of clear doctrinal error and entrenched moral corruption.

POSTSCRIPT: The people to whom I originally addressed the previous information did not receive my counsel. In fact, they cut off all fellowship from me and counted me as a compromiser. The last I heard of them, they were moving from church to church, becoming increasingly bitter, in search of that ideal congregation. This is very sad, but I have seen the same thing happen many times.

For more on this subject see the following free eBooks at the Way of Life web site: <https://www.wayoflife.org/books/>

- *Pastors, Deacons, and Church Members*
- *What If There Is No Strong Church?*