

Open Church Membership vs. Closed Church Membership, and the Bible

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Answer these questions honestly. Could Jesus, if physically here, become the pastor of your church without first becoming a member of it? Could He be an elder, or deacon, or teach a Sunday School class? Could he even be a greeter? If not, then your church practices closed membership.

But to those who say they would make an exception to their rules if Jesus, the Boss of the Church, walked in, let's examine that position for a moment. Who resides in a Christian making a Christian ... a Christian in the first place? "*I in them*" (Jn 17:23) and "*Christ in you, the hope of glory*" (Col 1:27). When a Christian walks into your church, isn't Jesus walking in, too? He's in there somewhere. It might be advisable to ask the Lord, why He has showed up to your church in that person. Do you think He might have a reason?

God commands, "*examine everything; adhere to the good*" (1Thes 5:21). Church membership is a "*thing*." As it profoundly affects the practical workings of the fellowship of the saints, scrutiny is demanded. Indeed, to leave this practice unexamined ... would be sin.

Definitions

Closed church membership places one's profession of faith *secondary* to the elements composing that local church's qualifications for "*membership*." A profession of faith in Jesus Christ, as one's Lord and Savior, is not enough to be "*in*." Chosen distinctives must be agreed to before full access is granted.

Open church membership recognizes one's profession of faith as an authoritative transaction between an individual and God. "*(J)oyously giving thanks to the Father, who has **qualified us** to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us **into the Kingdom of His beloved Son***" (Col 1:12,13). God Himself lavishes all kinds of temporal and eternal gifts, promises and positions at that transfer ... and he/she is "*in*." Open membership honors this eternal, judicial transaction immediately and fully - and fears unrighteously inserting itself between the all-powerful, living, holy Creator ... and His child.

The Catalyst For My Inquiry

When on staff at a residential ministry, a professing Christian left us and headed to a local area church. He was unrepentant of clear-cut sin. I called the church to inform them with the expectation they would investigate, *and then* present a united front toward that errant brother. *Internally*, such an action protects the local body and is actually an act of love toward the offender. *Externally*, that local body is protected from being viewed as a haven for unrepentant, "*spiritual felons*" who are professing Christians. Anyway, I was told that since that individual "*is not a member of the church*" nothing could be done. That shocked me. Questions then came ... and convictions then developed about this.

The Practice of Church Membership

Historically, church membership is a relatively new practice. The Reformation catapulted its use. Its purpose was to keep nonconformists to the particular sect ... *out*. Distinctives of the sect were thus protected from corruption, and as a result the chosen distinctives became a front and center message. Actually, not much has changed. This is one of those unusual instances when "*preservation*" actually promotes decay. To understand the forthcoming material teachability is required.

The “Free Zone” and the “Freeze-Out Zone”

Closed membership creates an outer “zone,” or ring, in the local church. Professing Christians can attend and float around as free agents - with no moral accountability or responsibility toward that body of Christians. This is a “Free Zone” created by this church practice - which the Boss of the Church never intended to exist. On the other hand, it is also a “Freeze-Out Zone.” Church “leaders” can keep out professing Christians whom they designate “a threat” for some reason. This is a censorship that is destructive to the “frozen-out” saint but also damages that local church body from oft needed gifts and perspectives. It is an assault on the priesthood position of each Christian that the Boss of the Church purchased by crucifixion and then bestowed on each of His sons and daughters. I have no desire to try to explain a practice like this to the King. I still like saying, “Boss” over “King ... Head ... Lord,” etc. “Boss” registers with me, causing pause with all my teaching, practices ... and articles.

Damage 1: Weaker Brothers Rule

Closed membership is actually the bad fruit of weaker brothers. This tool often keeps stronger brothers out who cannot, and will not, bow before varied fire-destined, plastic barriers. So, legitimate challenges to the sects elevated distinctives in doctrine and/or practice are excised. (It is possible that the forwarded positions can even be correct - yet elevated to an “illegal” litmus test position for other Christians to be able to function in that group. That makes the correct position “wrong”). Paul cites those who declare things “unclean” that actually aren’t ... as weaker brothers (Ro 14:1-23, and 1Cor 10:19-33). Sometimes this can be tolerated but sometimes it cannot. This is one area I do not think it can be - for some reasons you will see below. Of course, weaker brothers often do not *appear* weaker and clearly do not believe themselves so. They pound pulpits, institutionalize their distinctives, dominate via church bylaws and censure dissenters - thus keeping out contrarians. Then, in the greatest of ironies, they charge saints so dispatched as, “unwilling to submit to authority,” “divisive,” “factious,” “rebellious,” “lone-rangers,” “being their own God,” “unteachable,” “self-righteous,” etc. But, in truth, their plastic barriers protect their own selves from unwanted information and challenges. Closed church membership establishes bastions where weaker brothers rule.

Damage 2: A Maimed Body

God grants spiritual gifts to His children “for the common good” (1Cor12:7). The Spirit distributes these “to each one individually just as He wills” (1Cor 12:11). I will not be surprised if we find that all through history, God gifted saints in a common geographical area with a great balance of the gifts. And, the health of that body, and consequent impact on their area, will be directly related to the accuracy of their church leadership practices (polity). Closed church membership is an extremely effective tool ... for cutting the local body to shreds. Local “leaders” cut off hands, feet, ears - and gouge out eyes ... and then wonder why they do not have a greater impact on their community. Closed church membership is a product of the flesh or comes directly from the toolbox of “the messenger of light” (2Cor 11:14). The next point exposes why I say this.

Damage 3: “In Order That the World May Believe ...”

“I do not ask in behalf of (the disciples) alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word, that they may all be one ... in order that the world may believe that You did send Me” (Jn 17:20,21).

Open Church Membership is hard. Individuals of great differences gather, and work together in common cause. This befuddles outside observers because naturally, “birds of a feather flock together.” God wants to create a local body that is extremely “unnatural.” Open membership accomplishes this.

The resulting group *itself* speaks loudly *and* convincingly to the surrounding community without speaking a word! Closed membership creates churches that, to outsiders, look just like other groups. It is made up of the same “*type*” of people. This single error forfeits one of God’s greatest witnessing tools – a true unity in a true diversity.

The Local Church

... is God’s creation for His children in this age. Saints are equipped there “*for the work of service*” (Eph 4:12). Many of the spiritual gifts are exercised there for “*the building up of the body of Christ; **until** we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man*” (Eph 4:12,13). It is *not* a place of universal agreement on all things as each person is at a different maturity level - in knowledge, understanding and behaviors. So, it is a place of tolerance in many areas yet, a place where “*iron sharpens iron*” (Pr 27:17). That necessarily involves friction. It is a place of discovery, inquiry and growth - an oasis and a place of safety. It is a place where His children experience glimpses of the coming age, “*where righteousness dwells*” (2Pet 3:13).

Local Church Leadership’s Actual Responsibility

Initial responsibility of local church leadership toward a newcomer is extremely simple. All that needs to be determined is if that individual professes to be a Christian - or not. If the answer is, “*Yes,*” then as a member of the body of Christ, there are no other “*hoops*” one must jump through. A member of the body of Christ is already a member of the Church. “*You are Christ's body, and individually **members** of it ... Christ is head of **the church**, He Himself the Savior of the body*” (1Cor 12:27, and Eph 5:23). All the spiritual treasures residing in that local group are to be freely accessed. They are God's spiritual treasures anyway, and since He already gave His Son to die for that saint, none of these lesser treasures are to be withheld from His beloved children. Additionally, the newcomers are automatically under the spiritual responsibilities and jurisdiction of the elders of that local body. There is no “*free zone*” nor is there a “*freeze out zone.*”

Those last two statements need to be expanded upon. God requires a degree of behavioral and doctrinal soundness of every saint - new and old alike. Local leadership must be *extremely careful* in defining *what that actually means*. When Paul said, “*If any so-called brother ... should be an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler Remove the wicked man from among yourselves*” (1Cor 5:11-13), the church must make a great effort to define these sins *the way God defines them*. And when violated, the procedure of Matthew 18:15-17 must be followed. The same is true when assessing doctrinal soundness. Who would God label, “*a factious man*” (Ti 3:9-11)? What “*is contrary to sound teaching*” (1Ti 1:10) - as opposed to allowing convictions of even weaker in knowledge to stand (Ro 14: 1-23)? And what is an actual spreading of “*strife among the brethren*” (Pr 6:19)? Proper definitions on all counts must be carefully forged before the Boss of the Church and then be clearly announced to newcomers as soon as they let it be known they consider themselves to be a Christian. I would make sure they know it is fine to say they don't know yet. That exempts them from being held to these moral standards as Paul said, “*If any so-called brother ... should be ...*”. And freedom to challenge the definitions of these sins that have been settled upon by the local fellowship is an ongoing right if one believes grounds have been discovered for such a challenge.

Conclusion

God does not require anything beyond *properly defined* behaviors and doctrines for His children to have full participatory rights in the local church. Plastic barriers are an assault on that saint’s granted gifts and designations bestowed by the Boss of the Church. As these gifts and designations come

through a successfully endured crucifixion, any practice subverting these blood-purchased endowments - *is sin of the highest order*. Ignorance of these matters will not excuse one from accountability for these matters. Closed membership is a sanctioned recklessness. I contend this little article will survive His flames, while myriads of church rolls, and all they represented ... will go up in smoke.

“(L)et each man be careful how he builds upon (the foundation) ... which is Jesus Christ ... (T)he fire will test the quality of each man's work ... if any man's work ... remains, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he shall suffer loss ... Let not many among you all become teachers, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment” (Read all of 1Cor 3:10-15 and Ja 3:1).

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