

## The Local Church, Voluntary Association, and the Bible

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Not all relationships are created equal. Some are “*until death do you part.*” Others ... are not. Understanding which are which - and then functioning correctly in each one - will produce the most successful life possible.

At any given moment, we are in many relationships. Even the most “*permanent*” ones are still conditional. If natural family members insist one abandon Christ, then those family members can rightly be abandoned (Mt 10:34-37, Mt 8:18-22 and Lk 14:26). If one is married to a sexually unfaithful partner, that relationship can be terminated. Once past these primary, “*permanent*” relationships there is even more flexibility to adjust, or abandon, our associations. We have the right to quit our job. And we can join, or resign from, civic organizations as we deem fit. The point? We must never forfeit our voluntary association rights to anyone.

So, what about a local church? Is it a place of voluntary association? Well, if you have been in Christian circles for any time at all, you know there are varied positions on this. Many church “*leaders*” assert they have authority over everyone in their flock. Once you join their church, your Christian obedience - or disobedience - is measured by your participation in church programs and obedience to church leadership. If you leave that church without sanction from the “*leader(s)*” - you are in rebellion. In these settings, voluntary association evaporates with church membership.

I believe the brethren may have a bit more liberty than that. In fact, before the Church became a reality, Jesus had an interesting discussion with a man named Nicodemus - a religious leader of a dying religion. Jesus gave him a “*heads up.*” New things were on the way. Let’s listen in.

*“Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Him by night, and said to Him, ‘Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher: for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him’”* (Jn 3:1,2).

This conversation was a bit more tense than a quick reading might indicate. Jesus was already running afoul of the authorities and, as is evidenced by other passages, Nicodemus wanted to advocate on Jesus’ behalf (See Jn 7:45-53 and Jn 19:38-42). But, Nicodemus came at night - probably because he didn’t want this meeting broadcast too widely. (Boy, that sure worked out well.) And Jesus’ response?

*“‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.’ Nicodemus said to Him, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born can he?’”* (Jn 3:3,4).

I do not believe Nicodemus’ questions are searching inquiries by a wide-eyed, spellbound student. They are rhetorical questions - actually statements ... of disdain. They’re scowls by a man who was risking - who knows what - to meet with this young rabble rouser. He was probably thinking, “*I am here seeking information so I can defend You from lethal agents in the Sanhedrin - and you start propounding some ridiculous riddle? You have no idea the trouble You are in - and what these people*

*are capable of. I am risking my reputation - maybe even my ruling position - and you assault me with this dribble? Born again? Did you skip Biology classes?"* Jesus wasn't done.

*"Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again'"* (Jn 3:5-7).

Jesus' next statement forms the heart of this article. Visualize a candle between them - flickering ever so gently in the night breeze.

*"The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is **every one** who is born of the Spirit"* (Jn3:8).

In Koine Greek, "*every one*" is singular. It could be translated "*each one*" or "*every single one*." Nicodemus was given a preview of universal characteristics possessed by "*each one*" in the Church. First, all will be "*born again*." Second, they will move through life like the wind. It will be obvious when they are present - but where they come from and where they go ... is unpredictable. And Nicodemus' response?

*"How can these things be?"* (Jn 3:9).

This is another rhetorical question. Nicodemus was not wondering about this - he was put off by it. The voice had a snarl. Jesus then pressed him harder ... and chided him.

*"Are YOU (intensive in Greek) THE teacher of Israel (the definite article in Greek is often demonstrative - not just "a" teacher) - and you do not understand these things?"* (Jn 3:10).

While I fully expect to meet Nicodemus in glory, I don't think this meeting went the way he expected, or wanted, it to go. Jesus continued to flay him (Jn 3:11-15 at least) and Nicodemus probably left there wondering why the heck he had come in the first place. He was searching for defense information ... and left with a presentation of riddles and a personal rebuke.

Here is another bedrock about the Church. Jesus said, "*Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader - Christ*" (Mt 23:10). At best, pastors and elders are "*leading ones*" - not "*leaders*" (Heb 13:17). They are to provide an example on how to serve and follow *The Leader*. I discuss this in detail in, "***The Necessity of Spiritual Independence and the Bible.***" "*It is the Lord Christ whom you serve*" (Col 3:24). This applies to "*each one.*"

Unfortunately, Christendom has populated itself with multitudes of "*leaders*" - a noun. They are presented as authoritative under-shepherds. Their flock is under their watchful, protective eye. The sheep are to be submissive and obedient. When confronted with this innate liberty possessed by each born again believer - the blessing of voluntary association - they respond with the same scowl first uttered by Nicodemus: "*How can these things be?*"

The only authoritative power any Christian holds over another is limited to blatant sin. And that sin must be defined the way God defines it. If a Christian is in sexual sin, coveting, idolatry, reviling, drunkenness, swindling, factiousness, refusing to work, or carrying a false gospel message, then

pressure can be applied – potentially ending with expulsion from the local church (1Cor 5:11, Ti 3:10, 2Thes 3:6-12, and 2Jn 9-11). But this must be done orderly - with opportunity to rebut charges (Mt 18:15-18). And repentance reverses everything (2Cor 2:5-11). Pastors or elders (or any other Christian) possess no censure power from God when these sins are absent. *“How can these things be?”* Maybe some questions from a different angle will be of benefit.

Do you think your pastor really knows God’s plan for your life? Do your elders and deacons know why God saved you - and what works He has prepared for you - and where He wants you and when He wants you there? (For the record, these are rhetorical questions.) While some may say they know - you surely don’t believe that, do you? (I am asking a real question here ... I think.) In my own journey, I have no firm idea what my future holds - and to what the Lord may call me. And I am not convinced I have at yet met a true prophetic seer. I know my past, and what I am about today - but where I will be blown in the future lies in the domain of God. Such is the position to *“each one who is born of the Spirit.”*

*“For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God has prepared beforehand, in order that we should walk in them”* (Eph 2:10).

*“The mind of a man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps”* (Pr 16:9).

*“Man’s steps are ordained by the Lord. How then can man understand his way?”* (Pr 20:24).

*“I know, O Lord, that a man’s way is not in himself; nor is it in a man to direct his steps”* (Jer 10:23).

Sometimes, we know where He is leading us ... but sometimes we don't. Some chapters unfold step-by-step. In those chapters, one might not be able to explain why he/she is ready to leave a particular church. If a Christian is not running from sin ... that one is free to go wherever he/she wants. Jesus blows His own around. God often stirs or prompts us - and it is only later, through hindsight, the journey makes sense. The local church has always been - is - and always will be a place of voluntary association. God often wants to use us to influence, or be influenced by, different individuals and groups throughout our sojourn. For any church *“leader”* to oppose this is an assault upon the priesthood of that Christian. Oh, how sin compounds! First, *“leaders”* accept that title which is Jesus' alone - and then attack one’s liberty of association ... which is one way to assault a Christian's priesthood! God grants blood-bought positions (i.e., priesthood) and liberties (i.e., voluntary associations) for a reason. The real sin is allowing them to be stripped. So, my brethren, do not allow it.

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