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CHURCH MEMBERSHIP - Part 2

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The Bible uses the word church in three different senses: 1) the assembly (the Sunday worship assembly); 2) the local church (a group of Christians meeting in a given location); 3) the universal church (the church comprised of all Christians that belongs to Christ). Of these senses, I believe that the local sense is probably the most neglected among those who are Christians according to the New Testament pattern. Christians understand that there is one universal church, one brotherhood, of which they are apart. They understand that they are supposed to assemble on Sunday and call this activity “going to church,” when they really mean, “going to the worship assembly.” However, not enough reflection is given to the importance of being a member of a local congregation.

The New Testament upholds the concept of a local congregation. By the time the apostle Peter wrote his first epistle, he had become an elder (1 Peter 5:1). However, as his epistle opens, Peter does not claim authority based on the fact that he is an elder, but based on the fact that he is an apostle (1:1). In fact, when he speaks to other elders, he refers to the fact that there are “those entrusted to you,” signifying that not all the body of Christ had been entrusted to them (5:3). Peter understood the fact that elders were appointed over geographically located congregations, groups of people who assembled for worship in a given place. Paul understood this fact too, and appointed elders over geographically gathered Christians (Acts 13:21-23) and instructed Titus to do the same (Titus 1:5).

There are several reasons why local congregations are important. First, the New Testament commands Christians to show respect to those who “are over you in the Lord,” and to submit to them (Hebrews 13:7, 17). While it functions differently, the principle of submission to leadership exists even when there are not elders (1 Corinthians 11:3; 16:15-16). Christians couldn’t submit to all the elderships / men’s business meetings in the world if they tried. Imagine trying to assemble for worship on Sunday in thousands of different places, some of them meeting simultaneously! The only way for to carry out the Bible’s commands to submit to church leadership is through local congregations.

Second, the Law of Christ contains a large number of commandments that Christians obey through actions towards fellow Christians. In the KJV, NKJV, ESV, and several other versions, these “reflexive commands” (commands that Christians keep towards other Christians and receive the benefit of in return) are brought into English via the words “one another.” While these “one another” commands can be carried out through any Christian, these commands make the most sense in the context of a local congregation. For example, Paul encourages the brethren in Galatia to “bear one another’s burdens” (Galatians 6:2). Would you go to a congregation you had never been before and share your intimate needs and struggles with the brethren there? Would you expect someone else to do so? The only environment that breeds the intimacy needed to carry out this command is a local congregation.

Third, the body illustration that Paul frequently uses to help us understand the church breaks down without a local congregation. Christians who roam around from one location to another may be able to participate in worship services, but they will never able to contribute their time, energy, and abilities to a common cause. The only sense in which we can truly function as “members one of another” (Romans 12:5; Ephesians 4:25) is in the context of a local

congregation.

In a place like Alaska, the temptation is incredibly great to ignore the concept of the local congregation and to try to be a Christian at large - a Christian who only stops life long enough to worship. The temptation can also be great in the age of the automobile to ignore the need to worship with the congregation in your geographic location and instead drive to the church(es) that offer you the services you desire. The Bible calls Christians "living stones" (1 Peter 2:5), but God never intended for those living stones to be rolling stones! Sometimes work or vacation might force us to worship with a different congregation. Sometimes it may be good to visit another congregation to work with them in an evangelistic effort or support an event they are hosting. However, we need to remember that God's will for us is to submit to the leadership of a local congregation and to play an active role in all that congregation does.