

## **Dynamic Christian Living**

by

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### **CHAPTER NINE -**

#### **The Real Meaning of Church Membership**

**"Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular"** (I Corinthians 12:27)

CHURCH membership means a great deal; a fact which has probably been obscured by the prevalent idea that joining the church is just like joining any other organization. We need to be reminded that the local or denominational organization has real meaning only as it represents in the world a fellowship of true believers who, by the new birth, have become part of the living and true Church, the body of which CHRIST is the head.

Joining the fellowship of a church should be a sacred and solemn experience as well as a joyous one. In order to emphasize this fact, it is important that the church, whether it be large or small, carefully plan all of the details of the examination of the candidate for membership and of the procedure both in private and in the public reception of the member. It should all be worked out in the light of the sacred importance of the occasion and, carried out under the control of the HOLY SPIRIT of GOD in such a way as to be impressive not only to the individual but to the church as a whole. It must, of course, be true to the standards of the Word of GOD in every detail.

We may well emphasize the importance of making it an individual matter. Sometimes when a large number are being received into membership in a church, the pastor or official may be inclined to deal with them publicly as a group. In some phases of the service, especially in prayer or in the reception by the other members of the new members, this may be all right, but in other parts of the service, especially in any confession of faith which may be made before the church, it seems that each individual should be dealt with as though he or she were the only one being received. That is essentially true for while many may be present to be taken into the church in a particular day, GOD deals with individuals and each one comes into communion with GOD's people by himself.

All this bespeaks the necessity of dignity, reverence and spiritual discrimination in carrying out the entire service.

In receiving children special thought should be given to being gentle and tender with them and at the same time definite and spiritual. Children respond to such consideration and care and often surprise us by their appreciation of it. It is a great occasion in the child's experience and may be

made a glorious and inspiring one.

It is likewise essential that believers know what their membership in the church means, so that they may fully appreciate it and properly present it to the world.

Unfortunately, what the Bible teaches about church membership is probably less known to members of the church than many other Christian doctrines. Occasionally when opportunity has been afforded to speak on the subject the writer has noted that there has been an unusual interest on the part of listeners, and there have been many admissions by people who have been members of the church for a long time that they have not understood what was involved in church membership.

The richly meaningful passage from Colossians, which is our lesson, stresses three facts about church membership.

### **I. A New Life (vs. 1-3)**

The church member is (or should be) a Christian, that is, one who has passed from death to life through the regenerating work of GOD in CHRIST. (John 3:6, 7) Thus he has become "**a new creature; old things have passed away; behold, all things are become new.**" (II Corinthians 5:17)

Qualifications for church membership have been set by the Word of GOD and are not to be changed by man. Man may decide what he will require for admission to an organization which he establishes, and we will not quarrel with his requirements. We will only decide whether we wish to belong or not. In the matter of church membership, however the guide must be the Word of GOD.

The church is not an organization, a social or even a religious club. It is a communion or fellowship of born again believers in the Lord JESUS CHRIST, that is, those having a personal faith in CHRIST as Saviour and a desire to serve Him as their Lord. Any organization which sets a different basis for membership ought not to call itself a Christian church and should not bear that sacred name. The opposite is also true. Any church worthy of its name should have Biblical requirements for membership.

The Church is made up of those who are saved (Acts 2:47), those who have received the Word by faith and witnessed a good confession of their faith in CHRIST (Acts 2:41).

This is a fact to be remembered in a time when there is so much laxness in receiving members into the church. It is not a religious or social club. It is not a rallying place for those who wish to work for some economic, political, or social project. It is not a gathering of good people who wish to share common interests.

Isn't it pathetic to hear so often of someone who has joined a church simply to get ahead in business, or because they like the bowling club, (I had a man tell me just that!) or baseball team in a particular group, or because the right people belong. Perhaps Mama has met some lovely ladies at a club somewhere. She wants to cultivate them, and she finds that they belong to a

certain church - so Mama and Papa join the church.

All that business has nothing to do with the real Church at all. It's a sad and distressing thing that that sort of thing goes on constantly, and that such people come into the Church without any knowledge of the saving grace of JESUS CHRIST. Our Churches are full of them, sad as it may seem.

The Church needs to cleanse its rolls of all unbelievers, all hangers-on, and to get back to the purity which it had when only those were received who were manifestly "added" by the Lord.

If we had some real cleansing of church rolls, we would deliver ourselves from a great many of our church sorrows and difficulties, because these people who have very little spiritual sense, perhaps none at all, and no spiritual life, have no compunctions about what they will do to gain power in the Church. Consequently, when the Church is at a low ebb - spiritually, such people manage to become the leaders in the Church, and, of course, they lead the Church astray.

A man who lives a worldly life, who only wants enough religion to soothe his conscience a little bit and save him from going to hell, as he thinks, is not going to be a spiritual leader. He is going to run the church like he runs his business, and with the church that just doesn't work. He will only destroy the work of GOD and hinder the HOLY SPIRIT in His ministry.

Once such people get control in a church, it is almost impossible to shake them loose. The answer to the problem is to so cleanse the rolls of the Church from time to time that those who may have been taken in by mistake are eliminated. Then, too, there must be the right standards set up for the taking in of new members. Those standards should be observed, and we would eliminate at the very beginning the danger of which we have been speaking. Let us hold to the requirements of our Lord, "**Ye must be born again.**" John 3:7.

This new spiritual being in CHRIST has entirely changed interests and desires. The things of the world which he used to love have now become distasteful to him. The things of the Spirit which used to seem strange and not understandable to him (I Corinthians 2:14) now become the center of his life. Being risen with CHRIST in newness of life he seeks those things which are above.

We may illustrate this by the oft-related incident from the life of Augustine. It will be recalled that he was a very immoral young man, to the despair of his godly mother. One day through the reading of a portion of the New Testament which had been left open in a garden by his mother in the hope that her son would read it, he was converted and became a changed man. His evil companions were not willing to give him up, for he was a very attractive person. One of his former women companions in sin contrived to meet him on the street, and when he failed to respond to her affectionate greeting, she sought to entice him by saying, "It is I, Augustine." The reply was, "Yes, but it is not I." He was a changed man. The Christian has a new life. He is risen with CHRIST and he is to seek those things which are above.

That is what Church membership means if it is a membership based on the New Testament standard. But it means more, for it brings:

## **II. A Changed Life (vss. 4-13)**

Setting one's heart upon things above means that life will be changed. There will be a putting-off of the things of earth and a putting-on of the new man, in practice as well as in creed.

Although the Christian is a new creature in CHRIST, he bears with him until he dies (or JESUS comes) the old nature which tries to hold him down, to draw him back to the worldly and fleshly things from which he was saved.

That is why putting off the old man and his evil deeds means a struggle. Premier Winston Churchill of Great Britain epitomized the problems which Great Britain faced in the winning of the war in three words: "Blood, Sweat, and Tears." These were the price of victory. Much the same might be said of the price of victory in the spiritual life. It is a great battle and yet one in which we may be sure to be victorious if we look in faith to CHRIST who is your Saviour and Lord. He is the all victorious One.

But the Christian is to **"make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof."** (Romans 13:14) He is rather to **"reckon" himself "to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord."**

This calls for an act of will (and a repeated or continuous act) by which he puts away the sinful things mentioned in verses 5-9. One might sum them up in two groups:

- (1) sexual indecency and immorality (v. 5)
- (2) wicked words and attitudes. (vss. 8, 9)

The early Church had no corner on such sins. They mar Christian fellowship today. They ought not do so, for the church member should show the new life of the soul by a changed life before his fellowman.

One of the places where one finds a definite appreciation of the fact that the Christian is a changed person is in the rescue missions. A man who had visited the Jerry McAuley Mission in New York said that the most impressive thing in the meeting was not the address or message but the calm, unboasting words of experience of men who through CHRIST had fought their way back to victory over sin. Said one fine looking fellow who was about forty-five years of age, "I was nine years in Sing Sing prison before CHRIST came into my life, but now all things are new. I now operate a grocery store at such-and-such a number on Eighth Avenue. This woman beside me is my wife. If you doubt what I have said ask her about it after the meeting." There you have the simple confidence of a man who knows that CHRIST has changed his life.

Notice in verses 12 and 13 that there is to be a putting off of the old and a putting on of the new. Some who profess to follow CHRIST seem to think that the first is enough, that if they simply are delivered from their old life, they need not give much thought to the new life of victory and service for CHRIST.

Our third point touches on this matter which needs to be taught repeatedly - that this new, changed life is a loving, kind and beautiful life.

In other words it is:

### III. A Gracious Life (vss. 14-17)

Too often following Christ - and church membership has not seemed attractive to the unbeliever, nor has it recommended the grace of GOD to others, because it has been a sad, unpleasant, negative thing which GOD never intended it to be.

To the average non-Christian (rightly or wrongly), the matter of being a Christian seems to be a rather drab affair of denying one's self the interesting and pleasant things of life. One fears that many who bear the name of CHRIST misrepresent the reality of their spiritual inheritance.

Dr. J. H. Jowett says that he saw two sandwich board men coming down the street bearing their signs but apparently just barely able to walk. They were thin, hungry-looking men, emaciated and pale. He wondered what they might be advertising as they staggered along. When he came near he saw that the board said, "For the best dinner in London, go to such-and-such a restaurant." Their half-starved appearance gave no recommendation to the claim of their advertising. Unfortunately, many Christians who bear that beautiful name which indicates peace and joy, victory, satisfaction of life, are denying the thing they profess by living a weak and disappointing Christian life.

The purpose and plan of GOD for man is that he should be in fellowship with Him, and thus to be set free from the limitations and the disappointments of human life apart from GOD. The normal life of the Christian is one of love, peace, joy, fellowship and praise. Let us by yielding to CHRIST make it just that in this world of hatred, war, sorrow, division, weeping and ingratitude.

We need to watch the high pressure of life in our days which tends to rob us and our families of our tranquility and poise. In many families both the father and mother are employed. If this is necessary, of course it is most commendable, but in a home where the father is earning enough to support the family, certainly there is no point in the mother and the children engaging in extra responsibilities beyond their strength in order to make more money. We need to watch this matter lest we lose this opportunity for testimony for CHRIST and fail to show to our fellows the joy, peace, and love that is the true picture of what a Christian life should be.

This portion of Scripture merits a closer examination. Note first that love ("love" is the meaning of charity in v. 14) is the bond which unites these Christian graces into a whole which is harmonious and well-balanced. Naturally, the peace of CHRIST will be the ruling factor in such a life, controlling the heart, the seat of man's emotions and affections. This life is cultivated and developed by the indwelling of GOD's Word and (note it) "**richly**." The weakness of many a church is found right here - there is so little teaching and receiving of the Word into the heart.

Christian faith expresses itself in song. "**Thou hast put gladness in my heart**" (Ps. 4:7), and that means a song. How true it is that hymns and songs teach and admonish us.

I wonder if we do not need some of that gladness of soul now which characterized the early witnesses for the Lord?

It seems we are a little dour and sad about our testimony.

You know the old story of the man who was standing in the doorway of a mission inviting people to come in. He looked so sad and dejected himself that when he accosted a stranger and said in a doleful way, "Wouldn't you like to attend our meeting tonight?", the man looked at him and said, "No, thank you, brother. I already have enough troubles of my own."

Observe also that the life of the Christian church member is always conditioned by one perfect controlling influence - the will of GOD. He does all things, even the supposedly little or secular things, in the name of the Lord JESUS, with a constant thankfulness which goes up like a sweet savour to the Father through CHRIST.

In a world which is trying by every conceivable device to make the outward appearance attractive without any great concern for that which is within, it seems that the Christian church has a great opportunity to stress the fact -that true beauty of life is an inward matter resulting from faith in CHRIST as Saviour and recognition of His lordship over the life. We read in Psalm 45:13 that "**The King's daughter is all glorious within.**"

Women readers will know how much effort is spent on so-called beautifying by the use of cosmetics and similar devices. The largest industry in the world, we are told, is that of beautifying women. The materials and services available are almost endless.

Not only are there the ordinary matters of apparel, jewelry and accessories, and the endless equipment for beautifying the hair and the complexion but also books, phonograph records, and all kinds of mechanical and electrical devices for reducing, or on the other hand, for making thin people fat. All for an outward appearance of supposed beauty.

Well - we must admit that some of it and in some cases - seems to help, but Christian women should recognize that real beauty comes from a heart right with GOD.

How fine was the tribute paid by Edmund Burke to his wife, when he said, "She is handsome but it is a beauty not rising chiefly from features, complexion etc. It is not by these she touches the heart. It is that sweetness of temper, benevolence, innocence, and sensibility which a face can express that form real beauty." Surface beauty may be little more than a layer of cosmetics. Real beauty is spiritual. It is the only kind which is lasting - yes, it is truly everlasting.

Marie Stopes said on one occasion: "At sixteen I was vain because some one praised me. My father said, 'You can take no credit for beauty at sixteen. If you are beautiful at sixty it will be your own soul's doing. Then you may be proud of it and be loved for it.'" That is the kind of beauty which CHRIST gives and His church reflects.

Church members of that kind will commend the church and its influence to others.

In conclusion may we point out that it really does mean something to be a church member. Do we measure up to our privilege and our responsibility? If not, are we willing to seek GOD's grace that we may do so and thus honor His name?

~ end of chapter 9 ~