

WHY CHURCH MEMBERSHIP?

It is not uncommon to hear of evangelical, Bible-believing churches downplaying the importance of local church membership. Some even reject the practice of membership altogether. But in this de-emphasis on formally uniting with a local church, are God's directives being replaced with merely pragmatic practices which fall short of Scriptural standards? Careful study of the biblical teaching regarding church membership is a critical need in the church today.

An instructive passage addressing this issue is found in Matthew 16:13-19. After asking the Twelve about the public's opinions concerning Him, Jesus asked His disciples whom they thought He was. Peter, speaking for the apostolic band, replied, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God." To this confession Jesus responded, "...you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church..." Our Lord then stated a declaration which has far-reaching implications: "I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you shall bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you shall loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven."

But what are these "keys to the kingdom of heaven"? What is this "binding" and "loosing" function of the keys?

Keys have only two functions: to lock and to unlock. Possession of keys represents authority to open and to shut. Since the new "Israel of God," the Church, is no longer a theocracy governed directly and

immediately by God, He has determined that the Church will function under authoritative human leadership. Thus the "keys to the kingdom" represent the authority Christ has granted to govern His Church.

The Church's leadership is granted specific authority "to bind" — to derive from God's Word and to enforce that which is obligatory — and "to loose" — likewise to determine and allow that which the Word says is permissible. The teaching of the Bible, however, is often more principle than specific; thus judgments as to the application of scriptural principles to particular situations must be made. The "keys of the kingdom" are emblematic of the authority given to the Church to determine the proper standards of biblical faith and practice and to carry out biblical discipline when required.

Of obvious import is the answer to the logical question: "Specifically, to whom in the Church is this "binding and loosing" authority granted?" Church history offers three predominant replies to this query.

THE FIRST VIEW

First, the Roman Catholic Church adopted during its foundational years the view that the keys were given uniquely to Peter. According to this understanding, Peter alone received the keys and thus became the first Pope, passing along the keys to generation after generation of Popes throughout history.

But this interpretation appears to be based upon faulty exegesis. In the Greek language of the New Testament, the name Peter is Petros, meaning "small stone or pebble." But a different word, petra, meaning "a large boulder or underlying bedrock," is used in reference to the "rock" upon which Christ promised to build His Church.

Jesus thus employs a play on words in His reply to Peter by saying in effect, "Simon, you are Petros, a small pebble, solid but transitory. But it is upon the immovable bedrock of your confession that I am the Christ, the Son of the Living God, that I will build My Church." It is not Peter himself, but rather his confession of faith in Jesus which forms the foundation of the Church.

Moreover, though the English "you" in "I will give you the keys...", "whatever you bind..." and "whatever you loose..." is in its singular form in the Greek text, the same exact teaching of Jesus in Matthew 18:18 uses the plural. The same truth is also conveyed in John 20:23 using the plural. In light of these other passages, it seems apparent that in Matthew 16, Jesus was speaking to Peter as representing the other Apostles standing with him. Jesus is indicating in His teaching that the proper recipients of the keys are several in number rather than being a single, particular person. This observation leads to the second and third historic understandings of this passage, both of which rightly recognize the plurality of the "key-holders." The distinction between these two views lies in their differing identifications of whom the key-holders are.

THE SECOND VIEW

The first of these views is represented by the practice of some modern churches which suggests that Jesus has given the keys of the kingdom to each individual Christian. As he exercises saving faith in Christ, each believer uses the key to let himself into the kingdom. Churches adhering to this belief generally devalue the importance of church membership and may reject it altogether. If people believe they are Christians, they are thereby members of Christ's earthly Church. Membership in a local church, those holding this view would purport, is superfluous.

One difficulty with this position is that it makes each believer an authority unto himself and negates the need for church leadership and discipline. Advice, admonition and rebuke offered by other (more mature) believers have only the authority of another opinion. A related problem raised by this view is its impracticability. What Christian who has fallen into habitual sin will use his set of keys to remove himself from church fellowship?

THE THIRD VIEW

The second and most plausible view of the key-holders' identity is that one which historically has been adopted by the vast majority of Protestant churches in history past: in giving the keys of the kingdom, Jesus spoke not just to Peter but to all the assembled Apostles. He gave them collectively the authority to "bind and to loose," that is, to speak and to act for God. This apostolic authority was subsequently transferred through the laying on of hands to biblically qualified and selected elders in local churches (Titus 1:5-9; Timothy 3:1-7; 4:14).

Such God-ordained elders continue to hold the keys of God's kingdom in the church today. It is their responsibility to protect the purity of the Church and the honor of God's Word through biblical discipline of Christ's flock: opening church membership to professing believers, withholding membership from non-Christians, building up and encouraging the repentant sinner and dismissing from fellowship the unrepentant.

The possession of the authority of the keys does not guarantee some sort of infallibility on the part of elders. Their decisions must be based on biblical grounds, but they do not determine whether a particular person is or is not a Christian. Only God knows that with certainty. Nevertheless, the decisions and declarations of the elders carry the authority of God in such a way as to determine whether or not a person is to be "treated" as a Christian.

It is in this context of understanding that the full meaning of passages such as Matthew 18:15-18 and Hebrews 13:17 is revealed:



15 And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother.

16 But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed.

17 And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer.

18 Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.

MATTHEW 18:15-18

17 Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.

HEBREWS 13:17

In the passage from Matthew, "Let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer" means, "Let him be treated as a non-believer," which in practice means removing a person from church membership. "Leaders" in Hebrews 13 refers to those ordained as elders in the church, who plainly have the authority and the responsibility to faithfully direct God's Church.

In these Scriptures and others, the Lord has indicated the nature of the authority He wishes to be exercised in His Church. Other passages speak of the authority which God intends rightly to be exercised in the other two of the three foundational institutions He has ordained for the benefit of society: the family and the state (Ephesians 5:22-6:4; Roman 13:1-7).

Each of these three has a specific leadership authority which is granted the right and the responsibility to bless the good and discipline the wicked: parents in the family, civil magistrates and governors in the state, and elders in the Church. For the most part, members of society obey the laws of the state, if for no other reason than to avoid the civil and criminal penalties of law-breaking. The authority of the parent appears to have been in decline over the years, as the practice of loving but firm corrective discipline has been widely abandoned. The authority of the church long ago has been disregarded, in part because of faulty interpretations of the passages cited above and in part because of the unwillingness of the church to enforce biblical discipline even when it is theologically understood.

There exists an analogy between membership in the "visible" church and the "invisible" Church. In the invisible Church (made up of the truly believing), one is either "in" or "out," with God Himself as the Judge of the authenticity of One's outwardly confessed faith. Similarly, in the visible church (made up of people professing to have faith in Christ) one is either "in" or "out," with judgment as to the genuineness of an applicant's testimony granted to the elders.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

On a practical level, local church membership is an expression of obedience to God, through submission to the elders. Apart from this authority structure, leaders cannot lead and members have no one to follow, being like sheep without a shepherd.

Thus, local church membership is essential to the proper functioning of the Body of Christ. Through a member's fellowship with the local church, he or she has access to the privileges of corporate worship, the sacraments, oversight, care, loving discipline, and the fellowship and mutual ministry of other Christians.