

Having A Heart For God's Church

*"I love Thy kingdom, Lord,
The house of Thine abode,
The Church our blest Redeemer saved
With His own precious blood.*

*For her my tears shall fall,
For her my prayers ascend;
To her my cares and toils be given
Till toils and cares shall end."*

In this age of postmodern thinking, relativism, and rejection of authority I believe some Christians have a great difficulty putting themselves under the authority of the Word of God in every area of their lives and in every aspect of doctrinal truth. It seems we live in a culture of "*pick and choose*" what you want to believe and to what you are willing to give allegiance.

Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together. — (the challenge of Hebrews 10:24-25.)

Who is your favorite author? Maybe it's someone who has written only one book. (Are you aware that Margaret Mitchell, the author of the classic bestseller *Gone with the Wind*, only wrote one book?) Is it John Wesley. . . or Charles Haddon Spurgeon. . . or someone else from long ago who produced mountains of writings. Or perhaps your favorite author is more contemporary, such as the prolific writer C. S. Lewis. Or, even more current authors such as Charles Swindoll, Max Lucado, or John MacArthur, or Andrew Murray of many years ago. (At last count, each of these men have written many dozens of books).

Yet another prolific writer is the apostle Paul. He wrote more books in the New Testament than any other author.

Apart from our Lord Jesus Christ, the foremost figure in the history of Christianity is the apostle Paul. His personality, his writings, his preaching— all guided by the power of the Holy Spirit— have helped spread the Christian faith to the ends of the earth. I've read that the library at Harvard Divinity School contains more than 2,000 volumes dealing with the life and letters of this great apostle. In addition, the library contains thousands of commentaries in which Paul's teachings occupy an important place. Based on the works that have been written about Paul and his writings, and the fact that he wrote 13 books of the New Testament, we can conclude that here is a man whose writings are worthy of our serious attention. . . especially when it comes to recognizing the importance of the church, the body of Christ!

Especially we must consider that All Scripture Is Inspired of God. So, these are not the writings of a mere man, but what was penned was under the direction of the Holy Spirit. When we consider these verses (II Tim. 3:15; II Pet. 1:19-21) then we must embrace that everything written about the **Church** is the very words of God to us today.

Understanding the Importance of the Church

Aside from Paul's consistent theme of salvation by grace through faith (see, for example, Ephesians 2:8-9 and Titus 3:5), his teachings on the church are one of the most dominant subjects in his writing. That should serve as a clue that all of us who know Christ as Savior and Lord, who have a heart after God's own heart and who desire to fulfill all of God's will, ought to heed Paul's heartfelt teachings on this most important subject. ***If God inspired Paul to say so much about the church, then clearly the church is important to God***, and likewise, it should be important to us.

Then let me emphasize that the word “*church*” is used 119 times in the New Testament and over 100 times it is used concerning a local church, in a local place, doing God's work for God's glory. It is the Greek word, *ecclesia*. The emphasis of Scripture is not some universal church or merely the total number of the saved throughout the world. That church will never send a missionary, take up an offering, have a worship service or fulfill any of Christ's commands that have to do with the Church's ministry in the here and now. They won't meet until eternity!

Here's a sampling of what Paul taught about the church in just one of his 13 letters, the book of Ephesians:

- * the church is headed by Christ (Ephesians 1:22)
- * the church is Christ's body (1:23)
- * the church is to show forth the wisdom of God (3:10)
- * the church is subject to Christ (5:24)
- * Christ loved and died for the church (5:25)
- * Christ feeds and cares for His church (5:26-27, 29)
- * we, as believers, are members of Christ's body, the church (5:30)

And there's much more Paul says about the church. Given this emphasis, we can see why the church — both worldwide and our local church — should be important to us. In fact, the church is a priority for a man, a family after God's own heart!

Being a Member of Christ's Body

Most men are a member of some organization — be it for business or for pleasure. And we all know that organizations typically have standards for the members to follow — either voluntarily or through some type of enforcement. Dear friend, whether you understand it or not, as a born again believer in Jesus Christ, ***you are a member of Christ's body, the church***. This membership gives you many incredible privileges, but it also means that you have many weighty responsibilities. You can't have one without the other.

The privileges of membership — I'm sure you've heard the slogan of one credit card company, which says, “*Membership has its privileges.*” Well, our membership in the body of Christ has its privileges, too. In the book of Ephesians, Paul wrote about a few of the blessings of being a part of Christ's body, the church. (And please note that this

list covers only the first 13 verses in Ephesians chapter one! There are many other "privileges" that your "membership" offers you!

- > You were chosen before the foundation of the world (verse 4).
- > You were adopted as sons (verse 5).
- > You have the forgiveness of sin and been redeemed (verse 7).
- > You have been given an inheritance (verse 11).
- > You were sealed in Christ by the Holy Spirit (verse 13).

The responsibilities of membership—While a credit card may give you privileges, it comes with responsibilities as well (like paying your bill each month!). Likewise, as a member of Christ's body, you have obligations— *God asks you to fulfill your "membership duties."* Here's a partial list of your responsibilities. (Note that these commitments come from just one chapter in the book of Ephesians—there are many more!):

- > You are to live a life worthy of your calling (4:1).
- > You are to be humble and gentle, patiently bearing with others in love (4:2).
- > You are to be trained by your church leaders for works of service (4:12).
- > You are to become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (4:13).
- > You are not to walk as the unsaved walk in a vain thinking. (4:17-19)
- > You are to put off the old man with its lust, and corruption. (4:22)
- > You are to be made new in the attitude of your mind (4:23).
- > You are to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness (4:24).
- > You are to speak the truth (4:25). You are to be honest in all your dealings (4:28).
- > You are to speak only words that benefit your listeners (4:29).
- > You are to get rid of all bitterness, wrath, anger, brawling, and slanderous speech, along with every form of malice (4:31).
- > You are to be kind and compassionate and forgiving (4:32).

That's quite a list, isn't it? We can't read something like this and not wonder how we are doing in fulfilling some of these responsibilities. We have our work cut out for us, don't we? Fortunately for us, God is gracious and patient and doesn't revoke our membership in Christ's body when we fail to live up to our responsibilities. Why don't we stop for a minute and praise God for His mercy? Let's thank Him for His graciousness toward us.

As we move on, let's keep in mind that indeed, membership has its privileges, and with those privileges comes responsibility. You can't have one without the other.

Developing a Passion for the Church

Many Christians live a lukewarm form of Christianity with little or no involvement in a local church. Call it drifting, call it distraction, call it worldliness, yes, call it sin. Whatever you call it, their hearts are not fixed on or consumed with the things of the Lord. They need to be awakened to realize the crucial place the local church has in their life.

In this age of postmodern thinking, relativism, and rejection of authority I believe some Christians have a great difficulty putting themselves under the authority of the Word of God in every area of their lives and in every aspect of doctrinal truth. It seems we live in a culture of "*pick and choose*" what you want to believe and to what you are willing to give allegiance.

Some leave the church for years as young adults though they truly are saved -- this happens for many reasons. One man said, "*My return to the church began when I met a dynamic Christian man while on the job. God used that one man to ignite within me a new passion for the Lord, for His Word, and for going to church. Then when I began attending church again, some godly men began to disciple me and help me grow. They began to teach me about the significance of the church in God's program and the part I needed to play.*"

The results will be literally life-changing for any who begin to be involved with a truly Biblical, godly church who has a God-called pastor. They will gain many new friends who care about them and help them. Their children will make wonderful friends as well. They will come to know the joy and fulfillment that comes from being an active part of God's work. And they will grow in spiritual maturity to the point where they become active in serving Christ and others. ***Our participation in church gave us direction, meaning, and purpose.***

Church can do that for your family, too. If you're not actively involved, Christ is calling you to be so. If you're not sure whether you're in the right church, determine to find the best church for your family. (I know that can be difficult—it took us several months.) Determine to be faithful. Determine to be active. Determine to grow.

Developing a passion for the church is a matter of obedience. . .obedience that leads to manifold blessings. So, determine to be obedient!

Becoming a More Useful Member

You may already be actively involved in your local church. (This is as it should be, and I commend you for this.) But, like the apostle Paul, I would exhort you "to do so more and more" (I Thessalonians 4:10).

Here's a list of some ways that you can demonstrate to God, to the church family, and to your own family that you see the church as important in your life. Feel free to add some of your own ideas to this list.

Attend faithfully — Earlier we learned that one of the marks of a godly man is that he worships God regularly. If worshiping God and growing spiritually are priorities in your life, you will make room in your schedule to attend church when the doors are open. You should also look for other opportunities for spiritual input, such as classes

or seminars for you as a family or as couples. You and your family can never get too much input from God's Word! A wise man seeks wisdom (Proverbs 15:14), and that wisdom is available at your local church. Do you want to be the spiritual leader in your family? Then faithfully attend church with your family, and you will be well on your way to being the leader that God means for you to be.

Give generously — The Bible has a lot to say about money. In fact, Jesus spoke more about money than any other subject. Why? Not because the God of all creation needs our resources. . .which originally came from Him, anyway! But because we need to be careful about our heart attitude toward money, which can easily distract us from the real priorities in life.

It's been said that you can tell what a man's priorities are by looking at his checkbook. When you invest your "**treasure**" in God's church and God's people, you will have a much greater "**heart**" interest in the well-being of others. Why? Because "**For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also**" (Matthew 6:21).

If you're not used to giving to the church, start like Joyce and I did many years ago. Start with where you are and with what you have. Start with giving to the church at the front end of each paycheck instead of the back end. Start by asking God to help you develop discernment about the ways you handle your money. Ask Him to reveal to you any areas of greed or selfishness in your life. Your goal is to give with a cheerful heart. As Paul wrote, "*But I say, He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully.*" (II Corinthians 9:6-7).

Pray regularly — The apostle Paul called the men of the church to be men of prayer (1 Timothy 2: 1-8). He often asked his readers to "*Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints.*" (Ephesians 6:18). My friend, as a person after God's own heart, you should pray regularly not only for your family, but also for your church and its leaders and ministries. Write out a prayer list for the people you know both in and out of the church, and then "*pray without ceasing*" (I Thessalonians 5:17).

Serve diligently -- Become a person who can't wait to get to church so you can serve the people there? Your enthusiasm can be a great example for others. Serving others requires no education or training. You can start serving in your church today! How? Some possibilities, among many things, include...

- > setting up chairs and tables for the next church social or meeting
- > doing repairs at the church by using your mechanical or carpentry skills
- > cleaning the sanctuary before and after the services
- > greeting visitors on Sunday before the service
- > asking what you can do for the work
- > become a good teacher of youth, working in Sunday School, an Awana meeting, etc.

There are always opportunities available for serving somewhere in a church, and it's a great honor to serve our Lord. By committing ourselves to serving, we show that

we are people after God's own heart.

In a nutshell, take steps to become an active and useful member of your church. Just be sure you don't fall into the trap of excusing yourself from service as so many Christian do today !

-- Prepared by Dr. Edward Watke Jr.