

A FAITHFUL CHURCH MEMBER

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He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things. And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: that we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; but speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: from whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love

(Ephesians 4:10-16).

THE PROBLEM

For an annual fee, you can be a member of your community recreational centre, where you have access to its exercise equipment and swimming pool. If you choose never to visit the building, it's no problem. You can sit at home and eat ice cream all day and never get your membership revoked. So long as you pay your dues, you are a member.

Similarly, you can be a member of a book club or a music club that offers great deals on books or CDs. Club mailings say you are under no obligation to buy anything; you can return a book or CD at any time and cancel your membership.

In such a cultural setting, it is not surprising that membership in a local church has also become non-demanding. One denomination discovered that, on average, only 70 of its 233 members attended church

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worship.¹ The church leadership is partly responsible for this easy membership by not upholding biblical standards and discipline. So are people's views of the church. Some people treat the church like a museum that preserves memories and artefacts from the past, to be revisited from time to time. Others go to church as if it were a shopping mall, where they seek programmes and services that will meet their own needs or those of their family.

Perhaps in reaction to this shopping-mall image, some people have redefined the church as a community outreach programme. Some groups occasionally cancel Sunday worship services to rake leaves, wash cars, distribute food to needy people, or have a picnic in a nearby park. Worshipping God on the Lord's Day is replaced by social service programmes, missionary outreach, or recreation and entertainment.

To correct a faulty view of the church, we must go back to the biblical concept of the church. The Bible tells us the church is the body of Christ. A Christian, then, is a living part of a larger body of people. That is the essence of Ephesians 4:10-16, which says the church is a living organism. It is a spiritual and relational body; each Christian is a member, much as a hand or foot is a body part. Christ is the Head of this body. He and all his members are bound together

THE PROBLEM

by the Holy Spirit and the bond of true faith. That is amazing because Christ is the Son of God, and we are fallen human beings. It is also amazing because Christians in the church are so different from each other; they are Jews and Gentiles, men and women of all countries and ethnicities, old and young, rich and poor. These diverse people are nonetheless bound together all over the world as a living organism of which Christ is the Head.

This truth has profound implications for what it means to be a member of the church of Jesus Christ. Paul reminds us in Ephesians 4:10-16 that membership in the church is all about Christ. We will focus our attention on five areas of marks: Christ's Word, his person, his people, his cause and his image. We will examine what it means to be a faithful member of the body of Christ in each of these areas in the (1) personal, (2) public, and (3) practical dimensions of our lives. Thus, we will take a look at fifteen characteristics of a faithful church member.

MARK ONE: RECEIVING CHRIST'S WORD

Ephesians 4:11-13 tells us that Christ gives pastors and teachers to the church to the end that 'we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ'. Christ has ascended far above the heavens to give gifts to the church so that his glory will fill the earth. In his glorified state, Christ extends his kingdom by giving servants of the Word to his church. His goal is to bring his elect together in Christ-centred faith and knowledge.

The primary tool the Carpenter-King uses to build the House of God is his Word, first of all as taught by the pastors and teachers of his church. Therefore, the first mark of a faithful church member is *receiving Christ's Word* — not merely as

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an individual reading his Bible at home but also as a church member listening to the Word proclaimed by the pastors and teachers of a local church and applying it to his life. Specifically, receiving Christ's Word involves the following:

Personal hunger for the Word

In 1 Peter 2:2, the apostle Peter urges all Christians to thirst for the sincere milk of the Word, 'that ye may grow thereby'. If you are sick and have no appetite, you feel only nausea when served a delicious meal. The longer supper lasts, the more restless you become. Some people experience the preaching of the Word like that: a sermon makes them uncomfortable. They blame a minister for preaching too long, but the problem is that they have no hunger for the Word. How different is the person who comes to the table with a full appetite! Even a simple meal of meat and potatoes is a feast to someone who is hungry. So it is with a person who has a healthy appetite for the preaching of the Word.

Faithful attendance at corporate worship

Hunger for the Word in church is expressed publicly by faithful attendance at church worship services.

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Hebrews 10:25 says we must not forsake assembling ourselves in corporate worship. Christian worship fills us with the Word. Colossians 3:16 says, 'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.' Charles Spurgeon (1834–1892) wrote: 'There is no worship of God that is better than hearing of a sermon ... it stirs all the coals of fire in your spirit, and makes them burn with a brighter flame.'²

Active listening to the Word

Jesus describes four kinds of listeners to the Word in the parable of the soils, only one of which receives the Word, perseveres in faith, and goes on to bear abundant fruit. In Luke 8:18a, Jesus says, 'Take heed therefore how ye hear.' On Saturday, prepare for Sabbath worship by asking God to open his Word to you and to open your heart to his Word. As you go to church, remind yourself that you are going to the throne of God to hear him speak. John Calvin (1509–1564) wrote: 'Whenever the gospel is preached, it is as if God himself came into the midst of us.'³ What an awesome thought! When you sit before a preacher, stir up your mind

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to listen actively, as one who hears the living voice of God.

A grown man or woman would be ashamed of being spoon-fed from a jar of baby food, yet how many Christians expect a minister to spoon-feed them the Word! Cut your food and chew it for yourself. Think about what the preacher is saying. Train your soul like an athlete who disciplines his body by hard exercise to be stronger, faster and more skilful. Take notes on the sermon, giving special attention to the main points, Scripture references and personal applications. Listen with humble self-examination. Listen with delight to the words of life.

Thomas Watson (*c.* 1620–1686) offered numerous directives on how to actively listen to the preaching of the Word, such as, by coming to the Word with a holy appetite and a teachable heart; by sitting attentively under the Word, receiving it with meekness, and mingling it with faith. We can help ourselves to retain the Word by praying over it, practising it, and speaking to others about it. ‘Dreadful is the case of those who go loaded with sermons to hell,’ said Watson.⁴

Ephesians 4:10–14 says the exalted Christ builds up his church through his Word. The risen Christ gave the gifts of apostles, prophets, evangelists,

RECEIVING CHRIST'S WORD

pastors and teachers, all servants of the Word, to the church. Therefore we as members of that church must be faithful in receiving and seeking to profit by their ministry of the Word.

BIBLE STUDY QUESTIONS

1. *Personal hunger for the Word:* Read 1 Peter 2:1-3. If a baby has little appetite for milk, we grow very concerned. What does it tell us if a person professing to be a Christian shows little appetite for biblical preaching? What causes for this lack of spiritual appetite are suggested by verses 1 and 3? What would be its cure?
2. *Faithful attendance at corporate worship:* Read Hebrews 10:19-25. Christians are people who draw near to the holy God through Christ our Priest. According to verse 25, what is an essential part of drawing near to God? Why is that essential to drawing near to God?
3. *Active listening to the Word:* Read Luke 8:11-15, 18. In light of the parable of the soils, what are the dangers we face when hearing the preaching of the Word? How can we resist these dangers and become better listeners?