

Reflections on the Issue of "Church"

Initial Comments

1. The whole issue of "church" is filled with complications, because we live in a world of false definitions. Here are three examples, to illustrate this:
 - Genuine "Christianity" (as opposed to the fake) is a *relationship* with God, the Creator, yet most people have redefined it as a *religion*. In reality, it is a relationship based on the *objective facts* of the Bible, rather than on the *subjective feelings* of human experience.
 - In the Bible, the "church" is described as an organism, the "*body of Christ*"; yet today, most people use that word to describe an institution, a building, a group of people who have put their names on a "membership list," etc. The Bible describes it as comprised of people - specifically *all* who have been changed (given new life) by God. It includes *all* in the community who have experienced such a change, not just a select few who have put their names on some specific "membership list."
 - "Fellowship" originally meant people sharing in each other's lives, often with an emphasis on helping or encouraging each other. Today people often use the word when they are doing nothing more than engaging in shallow talk and gluttony at a "church social" or a "fellowship dinner."
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A Look at the Issue

2. The Bible is clear about what the "church" is. The problems and difficulties come because of what people have done to distort the concept. People have redefined the entire concept and (because of that) do things in ways that are completely different from the way God tells us to do them.
3. We live in an age in which the genuine (Bible's) concept of "church" and the counterfeit (man-made) concept of "church" seem to overlap. The counterfeit sometimes looks good and occasionally does some of the same things that the genuine would; so it sometimes becomes difficult to distinguish them. Because of this, it can be easy to slip from focusing on the genuine, to endorsing (or participating in) the counterfeit.
4. If the whole concept of "church" were being practiced the way the Bible defines it, "joining a church" wouldn't even become an issue. When God saved you, he *already* joined you to the church! Salvation is like waking up to new life. You open your eyes and look around, and you recognize others who have also received this new life (because you see that the evidence of life is present in them). These are the ones you would have fellowship with - *not* because they have their name on some man-made institution's "membership list," but because the life of Christ is in them and shines out from them. (Many "church members" who think they are "Christians," simply because they "joined" an institutional "church," have no more light than a burnt out lightbulb.)
5. Our job is to recognize (or acknowledge) those who are part of the church. We recognize them because the fruit of salvation (as God defines it in the Bible) is present in their lives. It is *not* our job to decide for ourselves who we want to call "church members" and to ignore the others!

6. It is more important for us to find and associate with people who have love for God and neighbor, than it is to "join a church." The idea of Christians "joining a church" only makes sense with the *false* concept of "church." It makes absolutely *no* sense with God's definition; for how can a person "join" something that *God* has already made him a part of?
7. We have no obligation to go beyond what the Bible says about the concept of "church." Or to put it more emphatically, we *do* have an obligation to *not* go beyond what the Bible says about the concept of "church."
8. The institutional "church" tends to want you to become involved in all sorts of programs, activities, committees, etc. These things absorb your time like dry sponges absorb water, and leave you with less time to do the things that God *really* requires you to do. The result? Such things tend to replace a person's *living* relationship with Christ with the *sterile* life of being busy with activity and motion. In the end, you could find yourself serving a man-made institution, rather than the living God. Don't let those worthless things interfere with your relationship with Christ! Leave them for the religious fakes - the "church-goers" who love religious activities, but who have no interest in the changes that are a part of following Jesus. Place your focus on the things of God!
9. The genuine follower (disciple) of Jesus is compared to an "alien" living in a foreign land (1 Peter 2:11). Sometimes the institutional "church" is so unlike the "church" of the Bible, that the genuine follower of Jesus will feel the same way - like an "outsider" - in the institutional "church"!
10. Some of the things done in a man-made "church" may be good and honoring to God. (This is *in spite of* it being a man-made institution, not *because of* it.) Though you must oppose any distortion, omission or compromise of what is right and true, and you must speak up about what is neglected or abused, don't tear down what is good! In everything, follow the example of your Master and Teacher, Jesus Christ.
11. There are people (especially leaders) who know that the modern concept of "church" disagrees with the Bible... and many of them simply don't care. But there are other people (especially *non*-leaders) who hold to such views because they don't know better. (Their leaders may have taught them the false concept.) So we shouldn't treat all people who have those views the same way.
12. The *only* New Testament word that bears any resemblance to the modern *false* definition of "church" is the word "synagogue"! You can go to a synagogue, but you *can't* go to a church (as the New Testament defines the word), unless you're an unsaved "outsider." Or unless you're a Christian who is visiting a group of Christians who live in a *different* community.
13. According to the Bible's definition of "church," we could never exclude a "neighbor" who has been saved by God (and who has the resulting fruit of salvation), simply because he wasn't a "member" of some specific institutionalized "church." This would be unthinkable! Yet many people who claim to be "Christian" do it all the time - and see nothing wrong with it! Those of us who accept the Bible have no choice but to accept such "neighbors." As for the "church-goers" who refuse to accept these "neighbors," all we can do is to pray that God will open their eyes to God's Word. If their eyes remain closed, we can pray that God will somehow bring glory to himself through them, *in spite of* their sin.

14. Anyone who has trusted Jesus for salvation, and who is now attempting to live as a disciple (follower) of Jesus, is part of our "family." We are a *community* of people who belong to God - and we must live that way.
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How Should We React?

15. In Jesus' day, there was an ongoing conflict between the "institution" and those who were genuine followers of God. *It is no different today.*
16. We must remember that we live in an age that is characterized by imperfection and impurity. We shouldn't be surprised when people don't do things the way God says they should - and when they are determined to stay that way. In this matter, as in everything else, we are to rely on the perfect God (and what he says), rather than on imperfect people.
17. Remember the example of Acts 17:11. Even the preacher is not necessarily 100% accurate in what he says!
18. Interacting with others who hold to a false concept of "church" can be rather difficult at times. Try to maintain a balance in your perspective. Let God's Word define your perspective and your expectations, and do what you can to encourage others to accept what God says. Realize, though, that your expectations won't always be met in those around you! Only Jesus is perfect; those around you (even those who actually want to follow Jesus) will not become perfect until they stand in Jesus' presence. (This applies even to you! Even though you may be correct in this matter regarding the "church," there are other areas - whether in your understanding of the Word, or in your application of it - in which you are still growing. All of us will be growing, up to the day we meet Jesus face-to-face.)
19. If it seems that all the Christians where you live are associated with institutional "churches" (whether through ignorance, or because they don't know of any other options), and you believe it would be expedient for you to "join" such a group, in order to have fellowship with them, you are not necessarily sinning. Just remember that you are "joining" something that was invented by people and often has little to do with the "church" of the Bible, and *make sure that you never let go of what is genuine*. Look for a group in which you can live-out what is *genuine* (whether or not the others in the group do so). Don't hide the fact that you know what the Bible says, but don't have an arrogant attitude, either! Some may oppose you - in Jesus' day, they opposed him, too. Others may be encouraged to follow your example - and to begin to live for God, rather than for a man-made institution.
20. Focus on your obligations, not on other's failures. On the Day of Justice, you will be judged by what *you* do, not by what *they* do.
21. Love God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind. Love your neighbor as yourself - even those "church-goers" who choose to be your enemies.