

Belonging to a local church

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1. Becoming a Christian

We need to be clear about this.

It is important to build our lives on a very strong and firm foundation.

We need to distinguish between a nominal Christian and a real Christian. i.e. between being a Christian in name and a Christian in heart.

People are often confused about the meaning of “Christian” because they were brought up in a country which has a Christian tradition, or they were brought up in a Christian home or had a Christian education. So they mistakenly think they are automatically Christians.

What Christianity is not

Being a Christian is not just believing the Christian creed, (i.e. believing certain facts, however important, about Jesus with our minds), or merely following the Christian code (living a decent life – after all some atheists do that), or simply attending or serving in a Christian church every Sunday, or going through certain ceremonies (many people have done this and suddenly realized that they have missed the heart of the matter.)

So what is a Christian?

“Christianity is Christ”. He is the foundation on which the building must rest. (See John 14:6, Acts 4:12, 1 Corinthians 3:11). He is the jewel in the centre of the Christian casket. Christianity without Christ is like a skeleton without life. Put Him in the centre and then right belief and living, the Church, its ordinances will have real meaning and purpose.

Jesus Christ is God's Eternal Son, who died for our sins, is now alive for evermore (1 Corinthians 15:3-4), and He can be known, trusted, loved and obeyed.

A Christian is someone who is personally and decisively committed to Jesus Christ as his/her Saviour and Lord.

He has turned away from an old way of life where self was in the centre, trusted Jesus Christ, who died for him, to save him and surrendered himself and all he has to Him as his master.

Commitment to Christ

A. ADMIT We must admit that we are sinners and in the wrong with God (Romans 3:23). We have all repeatedly broken His law in what we have done, said and thought.

Sin has separated us from God who is perfect and holy (Isaiah 59:2).

We are cut off from Him and are in danger (Matthew 7:13, Romans 6:23).

Our bridges (doing our best, attending church etc.) cannot reach to God.

God has given us a bridge to reach Him when in His love He sent His Son into the world to be our Saviour (John 3:16, 1 John 4:14).

Till we admit we have sinned and we cannot save ourselves – we shall never understand the Gospel and the real importance of Jesus Christ.

B. BELIEVE Jesus Christ is God's only and eternal Son who became man and died on the cross to save us. He took our place, bearing our sins and their penalty. (Mark 10:45, Galatians 2:20, 1 Peter 2:24). "He died that we might be forgiven" and to give us eternal life (John 3:16, Romans 6:23). Salvation is a gift. We do not deserve it and cannot earn it.

C. CONSIDER If we are going to belong to Jesus Christ, from this point on He must be our Lord and Master as well as our Saviour. He warned those who followed Him to count the cost (Luke 14:33).

We need to turn from all we know is wrong in our lives (i.e. in repentance) and then come completely under His control. "Under new management". He now must be master of our whole lives, including our possessions and our ambitions. "The entrance fee into God's Kingdom is nothing. The annual subscription is everything." We need not be afraid of fully giving ourselves to the Lord because this is the secret of life, peace and joy (Romans 15:13).

D. DO By God's grace we must personally trust Jesus Christ, receive Him into our lives and give ourselves unreservedly to Him. Only we can take this step. No one else can do it for us. This is absolutely essential, but many people miss this personal act of commitment.

Many people have found Revelation 3:20 to be a helpful verse at this point. Is Christ on the outside or inside of our lives?

Not sure? Then go over in ink what you may have written in pencil.

Some results that follow

We have a new life and become new people (John 20:31, 2 Corinthians 5:17). We are justified – forgiven and declared righteous before God’s Law (Romans 5:1). We are redeemed – set free from our slavery to sin (Galatians 4:5). We are reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:18). We enter a new Covenant (1 Corinthians 11:25) in which God promises to be our God and we become His people.

2. Can I be sure?

Can I be sure that my sins are really forgiven and that the Lord has accepted me as His child? The great men of the Bible enjoyed assurance. See Psalm 23:4, 2 Timothy 4:7,8, 1 John 3:14.

Assurance strengthens and comforts us. It gives us confidence, peace of mind, strength in times of trouble and makes us bold.

There is much that we cannot be sure of in life, but we can be sure of the most important thing of all – our relationship with God.

God is revealed to us in three persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit (The Trinity). Our assurance is related to each of them.

The work of the Son

Our salvation does not depend on what we do – our good living, our prayers or our church attendance. It depends on what Jesus Christ has done for us. He bore our sins and died for us, suffering our penalty and clearing our debt to God. See 1 Peter 2:24 and 1 John 1:7.

Remember the hymn - “On Christ the solid rock I stand
All other ground in sinking sand”

Look away from yourself and look only to Jesus.

The Word of God the Father

The Bible is full of wonderful promises for those who meet God’s conditions. See 2 Peter 1:3,4. Look up these promises – John 6:37, 1 John 1:9, Revelation 3:20. Never depend on your feelings as they can be very unreliable and are affected by so many things (our health, problems, weather and so on). Instead – rely on what God has promised. Remember the value of memorising important verses and underlining them in your Bible. The ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper set forth God’s promises in things we can see and touch. So they deepen our understanding and strengthen our faith. We can say they are addressed to “eye gate” as God’s Word is addressed to “ear gate”.

The Witness of the Holy Spirit

Every true Christian possesses the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:9). He bears witness with our spirit that we are God's children (Romans 8:16) and He gradually changes us so that we become more like the Lord Jesus (Galatians 5:22,23). We are to be continually filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18) and when He works in our lives without hindrance, He deepens our conviction that we are right with God and He causes prayer and Bible reading to become real. We also find that we want to please God and live for Him and we want to love Him, His people, His house and His day and all other people as well. Furthermore, when we fall into sin, we are now upset by it and feel uncomfortable until we have told God that we are sorry. These are all marks of the Spirit's work in our lives and are further proof that we are new people in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17).

3. Growing in the Christian Life

A Christian has been "born again" (John 3:3,5) and has received a new life in Christ. "Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). Everything becomes new as a result – our behaviour, interests, outlooks and attitudes.

It is important that the new life we have by God's power should grow. We begin as babies in God's family and are meant to grow up to be spiritual adults. "Grow in grace and knowledge" (2 Peter 3:18).

Birth takes a few minutes. Growth takes a lifetime. We must grow spiritually if we want to please God, be useful to Him and be happy in the Christian life.

Being a Christian is in some ways like riding a bicycle – we either go forward or we end in disaster.

When we are really growing we become increasingly like the Lord Jesus, and we have a growing love for Him and His people – and indeed all people. We begin to understand much more about the Christian life and we want to please and serve the Lord.

But how do we grow? The Lord Jesus Himself is the secret. He is the vine and we are the branches (John 15:1-5). As we maintain contact with Him, His life in us increases and we bear fruit. There are several means of maintaining our contact.

Like a baby we need good food (we need to feed on God's Word); fresh air (our prayer life); a good home (the fellowship of other Christians – be friendly to everyone, but make sure your best friends belong to the Lord) and exercise (Christian witness and service).

At the same time make sure that you keep away from anything which is harmful, which may lead you to sin or which causes you to lose your sense of the Lord's nearness.

And remember daily to give yourself back to Him, daily depend on Him, daily keep in touch with Him and daily consult Him about every step.

The Bible describes the way to grow in other ways as well. It tells us that we are to know that our old man (the person we used to be, under God's condemnation, and the slave of sin) has been, in God's purposes, crucified with Christ (Romans 6:6). So we are now to count ourselves dead to sin – it has no claim on us – and alive to God. As such we are not to give ourselves to sin to be its instrument, but to give ourselves to God to live for Him and to do His will (Romans 6:11-13).

Another way of describing how to grow is to say we should crucify (firmly refuse and reject) the flesh (i.e. our sinful nature) and live in the Spirit, keep in step with the Spirit and be filled with the Spirit (Galatians 5:16-25, Ephesians 5:18).

4. Our daily meeting with God

If we are to know God we need to meet with Him every day. During this time, when we read the Bible, God speaks to us and in prayer we speak to Him.

This daily meeting is vital and nothing else (however important) e.g. church services, can take its place. This is the time when our faith is deepened, our strength grows, guidance is received and we are prepared for the battle ahead. Naturally nothing is more attacked by the Devil because if our lines of communication with the source of power are interrupted, we at once become helpless.

All the great men of God have taken time regularly to meet with Him (Exodus 33:11, Psalm 55:17, Daniel 6:10, 1 Thess. 3:10). Even the Son of God constantly needed to keep in close contact with the Father (Mark 1:35, Luke 6:12).

God gives us every encouragement to come to Him – His Word with all its promises (e.g. Jeremiah 33:3, Matthew 7:7-11, James 4:8, 1 John 5:14), His Son who is our mediator (1 John 2:1, 1 Timothy 2:5) and His Holy Spirit who helps us (Romans 8:26).

This all requires us to set aside a time when we can be on our own with God, when our minds are fresh and we can be our best before Him. Since life is so busy we need to be just as organised about this as about everything else.

But this time is not an end in itself but a means to an end – getting in touch with the Lord who is the secret of life and power.

The more disciplined we are about setting a definite time for God each day, the easier it is to keep in touch with Him during the rest of the day (1 Thess. 5:17) and to abide in Christ (John 15:5).

The use of our Bible

Let God open the conversation – in other words start with the Bible. This will often show us things for which to thank God or to pray for when we later speak to Him.

The Bible contains different kinds of literature (e.g. history, letters, psalm, prophecies, poems etc.) written by over 40 different writers over a period of 1500 years. But it is

not just a piece of ancient literature, it is God's Word, inspired by Him to teach us and build us up (2 Timothy 2:16,17).

We accept the Old Testament because the Lord Jesus did (Matthew 4:1-11, John 10:35). At the same time He prepared for the writing of the New Testament (John 14:26, 16:13,14).

The Lord Jesus is the centre of the Bible. The Old Testament prepares for and predicts His coming, and the New Testament tells us of His coming, His teaching and, above all, His death, resurrection and coming again, together with their meaning.

We should not be concerned to learn so many facts but to get to know the Lord as we study our Bible (Psalm 119:9,11,105, Matthew 4:4, John 17:17, Acts 20:32, Ephesians 6:17, 1 Peter 2:2).

Obedience to God's Word always brings His blessing (Psalm 119:165, Isaiah 48:18, John 14:23).

Try gradually to get to know the whole Bible. We need a balanced diet for our spiritual as well as our physical health.

Use a Bible reading scheme with helpful notes.

Pray that God will help you understand the meaning of the passage (Psalm 119:18).

Think as well as pray (Psalm 1:2, 119:97, 2 Timothy 2:7). What does the passage mean in the light of its context and what does it mean to me now? How does it apply to my life? Is there an encouragement for me to take, a warning to heed, a promise to claim, a sin to confess, a command to obey, an example to follow, a new truth for which to give thanks? Try to keep this in mind during the day.

Then try to remember key verses. A notebook, a highlighter pen or a good memory are very helpful here.

Finally, we must ask God's help to obey what He has taught us (Matthew 7:24, James 1:21-24).

Our time of prayer

When we pray to God we must be reverent, but at the same time natural and simple in our approach to Him. Remember He is our heavenly Father.

Our prayers should not be a shopping list of things we want from God, but we should be thoughtful and balanced in our attitude. With this in mind many people find it helpful to take five looks when they pray.

* **A Look up – Worship** So we give to God the glory which is due to His name (Psalm 29:2). We think of His greatness and power and love seen in the created world all around us and especially in His salvation through His Son – Jesus Christ. Our Bible reading may suggest something wonderful about God for which we ought to

worship Him. Or we may get help from one of the Psalms or a hymnbook. (These, by the way, are also very helpful when we find our thoughts wandering or we do not feel like praying).

* **A Look in – Confession** Here we own up to our sins and failures and ask God to forgive us (1 John 1:9). We need to examine ourselves to make sure there is nothing between God and us. Do not pretend, but be honest and open with Him. Unconfessed sin takes away our desire for God and our interest in prayer (Psalm 66:18). Remember that sin does not break our union with the Lord but our communion with Him. “Keep short accounts with God”.

* **A Look back – Thanksgiving** (Psalm 103:1, 1 Thess. 5:18) We remember all God has given us and done for us – our life, food, homes, families, country and above all, His Son, His Word, His church etc.

* **A Look round – Praying for others** (1 Samuel 12:23, Romans 1:9) There are people all round us and in the world who are in great need. Above all they need the Lord. We cannot pray for them all every day, so we need a system i.e. prayer list. We should pray for some (e.g. our family) every day, others every week, and others every month, or whenever we can.

* **A Look forward – Praying for ourselves** (Psalm 34:4) We should talk to God about every aspect of our lives, asking Him to show us His will and grant us His help and blessing. By prayer we express our total dependence on God for everything. Nothing is too great and nothing too small to pray about (Philippians 4:6,7, 1 Peter 5:7, 1 John 5:14). As we pray for ourselves, let us remember to give ourselves back to Him each day (Romans 12:1,2), and ask Him to fill us with His Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18).

As an alternative, people sometimes use the word ACTS to remind themselves of the various kinds of prayer – Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication.

Finally – Let us not do all the talking. We should listen to God as well as speak to Him (John 10:4). “Listening to God in the quiet place prepares us for service in the busy place”.

5. The Ordinances (or Sacraments)

God teaches us about Himself and His salvation in Christ not only by His Word which we can hear or read, but also by things which we can see. Outward and visible signs help to make the truth more impressive than mere words do.

We call the two visible signs of baptism and the Lord’s Supper (or Communion), the “Ordinances” or “Sacraments”. They visibly express the truth of the Gospel, confirm it to us and give us the means to show that we have responded to it. Both ordinances speak of Christ’s death and the blessings we receive from it.

People often say preaching is the audible Word and the ordinances are the visible Word.

The ordinances remain only symbols but they can be the means of blessing to us as long as we have faith in Christ first of all. They help to deepen our sense of being united to the Lord and so strengthen our faith.

We are baptised only once because we are born again only once. But we receive the Lord's Supper many times, as we need to be assured often of God's forgiveness, because we still fail Him and let Him down. Also the Lord's Supper constantly reminds us of His love for us and how much we owe Him. This should draw us closer to Him and so our new life in Christ is made stronger.

The ordinances are also linked with the church. Baptism is, among other things, the door into the visible church (Acts 2:41-47, Galatians 3:26-28) and we partake of the Lord's Supper as members of God's family (1 Corinthians 10:17, 11:18-29).

Baptism

The Lord's Command

The Lord Jesus commanded that His disciples should be baptised (Matthew 28:18-20, Acts 2:28). It is a public confession of our faith and so becomes a badge of discipleship. In the New Testament baptism was one of the first things that followed conversion. Furthermore, there were no unbaptised Christians in the early church.

Baptism is the Lord's will for His servants and if He is truly our master we shall want to obey Him in this, as in every other way.

Believers Baptism

In this church we practice only believers' baptism (wrongly called "adult baptism" – it is faith in Christ and not a person's age which is a condition for baptism). This is the only kind of baptism which is meaningful to the person baptised. "Christian baptism is the baptism of a Christian".

(There is no evidence in church history of infant baptism till the end of the second century and it did not become the general practice till the fifth century. Even after that time individuals continued to protest against infant baptism, but it was not until the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century that larger groups of people returned to believers' baptism. Today it is practiced by many Christians all over the world. It is a very unfortunate fact that infant baptism has led some people to believe that it has made them right with God and fit to go to heaven. The result is that they do not see their need to trust Christ personally as Lord and Saviour)

The mode of baptism we use is immersion rather than sprinkling. This is what the Greek word "Baptizo" means and it is clear from the New Testament that this is the way the first Christians were baptised.

The Meaning of Baptism

Baptism is not just a public profession of faith, and following the example of the Lord Jesus (who Himself was baptised when He began His ministry – Matthew 3:13-17).

Baptism proclaims the Gospel to us declaring that Jesus died, was buried and rose again for our salvation. Then the person who is baptised is saying through the ordinance that in Christ he/she has not only been forgiven but has finished with an old life (the “old man”) and has begun a new life (the “new man”). “Buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead – even so we also should walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:3-8).

As faith is the inward response, so baptism is the outward response to the Gospel. Like a wedding ring, it is not the relationship itself, but it points to the relationship.

Baptism does not itself cleanse us from sin, or give us a new life, (we should already have these before baptism) but it impresses these truths on us more deeply. And as it is the Lord Himself who commands us to be baptised, we find that obedience brings His blessing and deepens our commitment to Him.

Baptism also makes it very clear that henceforth we are under a solemn obligation to live a new life under the Lord’s control and in His power.

Believers’ baptism is an important and memorable landmark in the life of a Christian and he/she can look back on it as a strengthening and stabilising effect on the person baptised. A baptismal service can be a challenge to the non-Christian to accept Christ, to the unbaptised Christian to be obedient, and also to the baptised Christian to renew his vows to the Lord.

The Lord’s Supper (or the Communion Service)

The Symbols used in the Lord’s Supper

The bread stands for Christ’s body in which He bore our sins and their punishment.

The wine stands for Christ’s blood, i.e. His life poured out in death for us. Because of that death, God forgives and cleanses us and receives us.

The words “This is...” (Matthew 26:26,28) have caused great controversy over hundreds of years and are still much debated today.

We should obviously see the word “is” as meaning “represents”. This is how we often use the verb “to be” e.g. “I am the door” (John 19:9) and “The field is the world” (Matthew 13:38). Or holding a photograph we say “Here is the queen”.

The bread and wine are not changes into Christ’s actual body and blood. Our senses (i.e. our sight, taste and touch) tell us that they remain bread and wine. Also the disciples, being Jews, would have been horrified at eating actual flesh and drinking actual blood.

The meaning of the Lord’s Supper

We attend the Lord’s Supper at the invitation of the Lord Jesus (1 Corinthians 11:24,25). If we truly belong to Him we cannot treat His wishes lightly. We should

also think of Him as the host and ourselves as His guests. We do not come as individual Christians, but as members of His family (1 Corinthians 11:17, 18, 20, 33, 34).

Several people take part in the service because it is a “congregational” service and they represent the whole church. We serve one another with the elements because we believe in the priesthood of all believers.

At the Lord’s Table we remember His death for us and all the blessings which we receive from it. Dying in our place, the Lord Jesus made a complete and perfect atonement or satisfaction for our sins. As a result we are forgiven and accepted and we share in the New Covenant (1 Corinthians 11:25 cf. Jeremiah 31:31-34) in which God promises to be our God and He takes us as His people. So we give Him our heartfelt thanks for all He is and all He has done for us.

We need to be constantly reminded of these things because we so easily forget.

Eating the bread and drinking the wine show that we have made the blessings of His death our own and we belong to Him. At the same time we give ourselves back to Him, thus reaffirming our side of the covenant.

Also in a spiritual way we feed on the Lord who is in the midst of His people and we lay hold of His grace and strength. Of course, we can commune with Him in many ways, e.g. Bible and prayer, but communion at the Table is more vivid because an appeal is made to our senses as well as our mind, i.e. the bread and wine are a visual reminder to us of Him and His salvation. The Lord is everywhere and He is not more present at His Table than anywhere else, but at the Table everything is done to remind us of His presence.

So coming to the Lord’s Table in faith gives us a clearer understanding of what Christ means to us and has done for us. As a result we realise the importance of trusting Him more and loving Him more. No one less than the Son of God loved me and gave Himself for me.

Also, if we come to the Lord’s Table knowing that we have recently failed Him and are truly sorry, we receive, through the bread and wine, a stronger assurance that we have been forgiven. The Lord’s Supper lays on us a definite obligation to live faithfully and obediently for Him in front of the world. We profess, by our participation, that we are saved and are His people and so we ought to live like that during the week.

All this means that if we partake of the Lord’s Supper in a prayerful and thoughtful way our relationship with the Lord will be deepened. So the ordinance becomes a means of blessing to us.

The church is to observe the Lord’s Supper “until he comes”. In other words, we not only look back to the Lord’s death, but forward to His second coming (Matthew 26:29, 1 Corinthians 11:26).

Who should come to the Lord's Supper and how should they come?

Obviously only Christians ought to come to the Lord's Supper (though there is no reason why others should not attend the service and see what takes place). No one should pretend to be saved if he is not really a Christian.

But should people be baptised first of all? There has been a lot of debate about this over the years. In the New Testament, baptism came first (Matthew 28:19, Acts 2:38-42). Also the symbolism of the ordinances points to that order – the beginning of the Christian life comes before continuing, the new birth comes before growing in Christ. But others say that if people belong to the Lord they should not be prevented from coming to His Table. Perhaps the best way is to invite all Christians to come to the Lord's Table (as long as they are walking in fellowship with Him). But if they do not belong to any other church and intend to come regularly to the Lord's Supper, they should be warmly encouraged to be baptised as soon as possible. It is the Lord's will that we should observe both ordinances and we have no right to obey the one but not the other. They are of equal importance and we cannot pick and choose if Christ is really Lord of our lives. If we love Him we shall keep His commandments (John 14:15). If people were baptised soon after they came to know Christ, as happened in New Testament times, the problem would not arise.

When we come to the Lord's Table we ought to make sure that there is nothing between the Lord and us, e.g. no unforgiven sin or wilful disobedience to His known will.

Also we ought to make sure that there is nothing between us and other people sitting with us at the Table. We cannot honestly partake of the same bread signifying our unity in Christ if we are not on speaking terms! While we may not agree with someone about everything, the important thing is that we are in a right and truly Christian relationship with him/her. Matters should be put right with another Christian if something has upset our relationship, before we take part in the Lord's Supper.

This last point reminds us again that we come to the Lord's Table as members of God's family (Acts 2:42, 1 Corinthians 11:17, 18, 20, 33, 34). It is the supreme expression of our fellowship in Him. (This explains why in some churches an offering is made for people in need and prayer is offered for church members who are ill, why people are received into membership at the Lord's Table, and why a member who is under discipline is asked not to come to the Lord's Table).

All these things underline the importance of preparing ourselves carefully (1 Corinthians 11:27,28) before we come to the Lord's Supper. It will never have any real meaning for us if we come thoughtlessly or out of habit (Psalm 66:18). We need to think very carefully and reverently about what we are doing.

Our attitude to the Lord's Table is a good barometer of our spiritual life.

6. Church Membership

The Meaning of the word "church"

The church is the people of God – those whom He has saved in Christ and called to belong to Him. The Greek word “ekklesia” is based on two words meaning “called out”. We have been called out of the world to be His people.

The church is not a religious or social club, but a divine society. Its head is Jesus Christ and it forms His body (Colossians 1:18).

Each member of the Trinity is involved in the creation and life of the church. The Father chose His people before the creation of the world (Ephesians 1:4). The Son died for the church on the cross (Ephesians 5:25). The Holy Spirit indwells the church and baptises believers into the Body of Christ (Ephesians 2:22, 1 Corinthians 12:13).

God created the church first of all for Himself – for His delight and glory (1 Peter 2:9). Then He also brought it into being to accomplish His purposes in this world, to help His people and to reach out to those who do not know Him.

He has given His people the ordinances of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper as pledges of His love.

The Two ways in which the New Testament speaks of the Church

18 times the word means the universal church consisting of all true believers in Christ, whoever and wherever they are (Matthew 16:18, Ephesians 5:23). 92 times the word means the local church in a particular place like Jerusalem or Corinth (Acts 8:1, 1 Corinthians 1:2). (Note that the word is never used to mean a building or a religious denomination, as it is nowadays by us).

Everyone who belongs to Christ and is born again is a member of the universal church, and they ought, therefore, to belong to a local church. If we love the church as He loved it, we shall surely want to be part of the visible company of believers in the place where we live.

The Three reasons for the existence of the local church

The local church exists first of all for the worship of Almighty God (Psalm 29:2). In our services we should be concerned in every part to set forth God’s “worth”. Then we meet also to be built up in our faith through the ministry of God’s Word and prayer and by encouraging one another (Acts 2:42, Hebrews 10:24,25, 1 Peter 2:2). Fellowship is not an optional extra but is essential for our spiritual growth. Finally, the local church exists to evangelise those who do not know the Lord (Acts 1:8). So in other words we should be looking upwards, inwards and outwards. Any church which neglects any of these three things soon becomes lopsided.

The government of the local church

We believe in the independent form of church government, i.e. the church should not be governed by bishops or a central church body, but it should be autonomous, under the immediate direction of the Lord, who is the Head of the church. All the members are equal in status and are free to express their mind at the church meeting. Each member has been given gifts to build up the fellowship (Romans 12:3ff, 1 Corinthians

12:1ff, Ephesians 4:7). Among these gifts are those of leadership and so the church has elders, including a pastor, and deacons.

Elders and Deacons

Within the context of the priesthood of all believers and ministry of the whole church, leadership in the local church is essential for its proper functioning. While some offices (like apostle and prophets) in the New Testament have ceased now with the completion of God's revelation in the Scriptures, those of elder and deacon remain.

“Bishop” or “overseer” and “elder” were the same office in the New Testament churches (Acts 20:17, 28, Titus 1:5,7, Philipians 1:1, James 5:14, 1 Peter 5:1).

Elders have pastoral care of the church and are responsible for leading, instructing, protecting and guiding its members. They are led in those responsibilities by the pastor-teacher (Ephesians 4:11, 1 Timothy 5:17) who is also normally (but not exclusively) responsible for preaching the Word and administering the Ordinances.

The character and responsibilities of elder are described in Acts 20:28, 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9, 1 Peter 5:1-3.

Deacons are responsible for the temporal and material affairs of the church and so they care for such things as church property and financial matters. Their character and responsibilities are described in Acts 6:1-6 and 1 Timothy 3: 8-10, 12-13.

Some people believe that in the New Testament churches there were also lady deacons, e.g. “Phoebe” (Romans 16:1). They argue that in the context of 1 Timothy 3:11 “women” is a better translation than “wives”. (N.B. There is no “their” in the original Greek). From the 17th century onwards there have always been some churches (fully accepting the authority of the Bible), who have appointed lady deacons (but not lady elders) to care especially for the needs of ladies in the fellowship.

Leaders of a church and of organisations within the church set the spiritual standard of that fellowship by their commitment and example. Rarely do churches rise higher than the spiritual level of their leaders.

Members of the local church

We believe that people should be members of a church not because they were born in a “Christian” country, or belong to a Christian family, or because they have been through a religious ceremony. People should be members only because they have personally responded to the Gospel and know Jesus Christ personally as Lord and Saviour (That is also the reason why we practice only believers' baptism and emphasise that only believers should partake of the Lord's Supper).

When we join a local church it becomes our spiritual home and we are committed to supporting it in every way. Membership is an important way of confessing and serving the Lord and we ourselves find much help from the support and experience of other Christians.

In New Testament times there were no independent and isolated Christians, but everyone was a member of a church. We believe all Christians should follow this pattern today.

The duties of church membership

Our supreme loyalty is of course to the Lord, but our second commitment is to His people (2 Corinthians 8:5). If we belong to the head, we belong to the body as well. We are not doing God a favour by joining a church, but enjoying a great privilege and so we are bound to take the matter very seriously. Before joining a church, people should remember that membership involves very serious responsibilities. Our loyalty to the church should be expressed in various ways:

(a) Attendance at the various meetings of the church on Sundays and during the week as far as we possibly can. (After all it was the church and not the minister which fixed those meetings and their times) (Psalm 27:4, 121:1, 1 Corinthians 11:33, Hebrews 10:25).

(b) Concern to maintain unity and love among the members (John 13:34, Ephesians 4:3). We, as brothers and sisters in the same family, should be warm, welcoming and very practical (1 John 3:16-18). We are “all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). We should bear one another’s burdens (Galatians 6:2), be ready to forgive (Ephesians 4:32), and regularly pray for one another (James 5:16). It would be very helpful if, using the church list of members and friends, we prayed for one or two people or families each day. We should also carefully avoid anything which spoils fellowship and good relationships in the church.

(c) Wholehearted commitment to the doctrinal position of the church (Jude 3).

(d) Support for our leaders who bear very heavy responsibilities (1 Thess. 5:12, 13, Hebrews 13:17).

(e) Care for the good name of the church in the community (1 Thess. 4:11, 12). People judge our church by us. Actions speak louder than words. Never criticise fellow Christians before the world. Remember the confidentiality of church meetings – “The things of the house within the house”.

(f) Concern for our fellow Christians who faithfully preach the Gospel all over the world. We should take an interest in them, pray for them – especially those who are suffering and being persecuted (1 John 3:14, Hebrews 13:1-3). When we are on holiday we ought to join in worship with other Christians in the place where we are staying. This will greatly encourage them and at the same time help us.

(g) Responsible stewardship of our time and talents and money for the work of the Gospel (Matthew 20:26,27, 25:14-30). Many Christians argue that if God’s people in the Old Testament gave a tithe (i.e. tenth) of their income to the Lord (Malachi 3:8-10), Christians who belong to the New Covenant can hardly do less.

(h) Concern about the outside world. We are to love our neighbours as ourselves (Luke 10:27-37) and to do good to all men, especially to those who belong to the family of believers (Galatians 6:10). This will include a concern to help people in material need and also a concern to bring them the Gospel (Romans 1:14,15).

“If every member were just like me
What sort of church would my church be?”

All these responsibilities of church membership remind us how much we need the power of God’s Holy Spirit in our lives to enable us to live and serve Him as He deserves (Romans 5:5, 1 Corinthians 3:5, Ephesians 5:18).

7. Christian Service

The Lord Jesus as our example

Because we acknowledge Christ as our Saviour and Lord, we are called to be servants of God (Mark 10:44, Ephesians 6:7). In this service the Lord Himself is our supreme example (John 13:14, 1 John 2:6). Among His many titles is that of Servant (Acts 3:13, Philippians 2:7). He came into the world to do God’s will (John 4:34) and that involved, in His case, not only serving others but giving His life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

Preparation for service

Before we can truly serve God we have to consecrate ourselves unreservedly to the Lord (2 Corinthians 8:5). We must not try to avoid this by just submitting acts of service and generosity in place of giving Him ourselves. God wants the whole of us – our will, heart, body, mind and faculties etc. We are to be His entirely and always at His disposal wherever He has placed us (Romans 12:1,2, 1 Corinthians 6:19). In other words our initial act of surrender is just the beginning of a life of surrender. The act must become an attitude.

He must possess us so that He can use us. “In response to the gift of a whole Christ, a man gives his whole self to Him”.

Incomplete surrender leads to spiritual weakness and loss of God’s blessing.

In giving ourselves to the Lord we also give all that we possess to Him, and we become just His stewards. So we hand over to Him our gifts and talents, our possessions, skills, qualifications, position, money, time and so on (Matthew 25:14-30, Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4). All are to be used in His will and for His glory (Matthew 6:33, 1 Corinthians 6:20, Colossians 3:23).

Our attitude to service

As Christians we are new men and women (2 Corinthians 5:17). We are under a new authority, have new aims and motives, a new attitude to others, daily work, home, honesty, and money. So we seek to serve God in every sphere and do our work as to the Lord. This will mean doing our best and working honestly and conscientiously. To

have a good and dependable Christian character is a powerful witness wherever we are.

We should not only live for Christ, but also speak for Him (Acts 1:8) and be willing to explain our faith to others (1 Peter 3:15). It is also important to encourage one another in Christian character and service (Hebrews 10:24). But unless the way we live matches what we say, we do more harm than good.

The Spheres in which we can serve God

(a) The Church We are not meant to be passengers but workers in the church to which we belong. We serve God when we worship Him and work for Him wholeheartedly (Deuteronomy 4:29, Matthew 4:10, John 4:24, Ephesians 6:5-7). We serve others in the church by praying for them and helping to build them up (1 Corinthians 12:12-27), holding office (Acts 6:3-7), and giving for the work of the Gospel (2 Corinthians 8:4, 9:6-8). We should also remember to be open to God's call to what is often called "full time service" at home or overseas (though of course in another sense we are all in full time service).

(b) The home Being a Christian should make all the difference to our family life. Whatever our position in the family we have a duty to others (Ephesians 5:22-6:4). Homes should be used in the service of the Gospel (Acts 12:12, Romans 16:3-5, Philemon 1,2). Hospitality is a very important means of spreading the Gospel and strengthening the fellowship (Romans 12:13, Hebrews 13:2, 1 Peter 4:9). Christian homes are a tremendous support for a local church.

(c) Daily Work Daily work is part of our Christian calling (Genesis 2:15, 1 Corinthians 7:20, 1 Thess. 4:11-12). By it we provide for ourselves and others (Ephesians 4:28, 1 Timothy 5:8). In choosing a career the Christian is not primarily concerned with money or material advantage, but doing God's will, using his opportunities to serve in the light of his talents and ability.

(d) Our country Christians are citizens of two kingdoms – a heavenly kingdom and an earthly kingdom – and have a responsibility to both (Matthew 22:21). We are called to act as salt and light and to let our light shine before men that God may be glorified (Matthew 5:13-16). As far as it is consistent with our Christian principles, we should play our part in the community and try to influence it for Christ. But if there is a clash of interests, our loyalty to God must always come first (Acts 5:29).