



The *Pulpit Exchange*

It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. (1 Corinthians 1:21)
So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading. (Nehemiah 8:8) Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend. (Proverbs 27:17)

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Voluntary Concept of Church Membership

I trust you are here because you want to be. Voluntary Church membership means a part of that is a willingness and a desire to be where the people of God are. We are glad to be there. Voluntary begins with *vol* that is a Latin root which means “the will.” Of course, voluntary involves the will. It means to do something by one’s own will or consent. God implanted within every human being the power to

choose. What we are thinking about is the freedom that God allows. The Scriptures suggest that we can choose our church.

In studying for this topic, I looked through *The Eastern Testimony* looking for an article with this title, and in all seven volumes I did not find any article with exactly this title. I suppose there were articles that dealt with some of the issues that we will talk about. However, it was

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interesting then, when I turned to *The Historical Journal* that the very first article, in the very first issue was *The Anabaptist Concept of Liberty of Conscience*. This is a very closely related subject. It is where voluntary church membership is perhaps focussing on the viewpoint of the Church. The Anabaptist concept of liberty of conscience is basically the same idea. I will read from this article. “The term liberty of conscience

embodies the basic principle of voluntarism as practiced by the Anabaptists in the face of religious tolerance from the established churches of the Sixteenth century. The Anabaptists rejected all persecution.” That means that they did not practice persecution. They certainly could not reject persecution — they were severely persecuted. “And clearly held that any attempt to force the faith on others was unScriptural.” This is the con-

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cept that we are thinking of. “Their concept of true liberty of conscience was that the State should not demand religious conformity from the populous, but rather that the Christian, while being a law abiding asset to the State, should be free to move as the Holy Spirit directs and have a conscience void of offence in the light of God’s Word.”

While maybe we do not think of this subject as much as a current issue, it was a very serious and current issue in the rise of the Anabaptist church many years ago in the Sixteenth century (in the 1500’s). My outline is I) A Bible basis for the concept of voluntary church membership. II) The historic record. III) Our present practice of voluntary church membership.

I) I was impressed and drawn to Acts 2:41 in thinking about voluntary church membership. “Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.” There we have voluntary church membership. The church was for the people who wanted it. It was those who gladly received it. That is who it was for. A little later in chapter 5, after the experience of Ananias and Sapphira when sin was dealt with, there were some people

who did not want it. “And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things. . . .And of the rest durst no man join himself to them: but the people magnified them” (Acts 5:11, 13). They did not want to expose themselves to what the Church represented.

In Acts 2:41, I see two very basic doctrines or principles that are involved in this subject. When we think about the free will of man, we also need to consider the sovereign will of God. We have that in 2:41, “they that gladly received . . .” what? “His word.” What is His Word? It is the revelation of the sovereign will and mind of God. Yes, voluntary church membership means that God allows man to make the Church whatever he wants to make it. Men have done that. They have made the Church whatever they want to make it. Nevertheless, as far as God’s viewpoint in the matter, He has a sovereign mind and will about what the Church is. It is revealed in His Word and He has given us the freedom and opportunity to either choose His sovereign will for the Church and what it represents — surrender ourselves to that, or else we can serve ourselves. If we want to, we can serve the devil or make the Church what we want it to be.

However, the sovereign will of God has in mind something for the Church.

What is the Church according to Acts 2? What is the Word that these people received? In Acts 2:23, 24, Peter was preaching about Jesus. "Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain: (24) Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it." The blood sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ is a part of the foundation of the Church. It is also the resurrection; Jesus was loosed from death and raised again by the power of God and He did not "see corruption" (verse 27). The power of the Holy Spirit came in verse 17, "in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh." All of this is involved in the New Covenant which God introduced, which includes the Church. When they received this message, what happened? It says that they were added to the Church. Verse 41 simply says "added unto them," but verse 47 says they were, "added to the church."

The message, the Gospel of salvation, the whosoever will message of John 3:16 forms a

body. It forms the Church. Those who receive this message make a body and the eternal truth of God's Word forms a body. Recently there was a man who was reading Rod and Staff literature and was interested in the clear Gospel teaching that he was getting in these articles and booklets that he was reading. He sought out the bookstore in Wisconsin. (I think he lived in Chicago or somewhere). He said, "I came to find more about the people. The truth that I am reading in your literature, this kind of literature must form a body." How right he was. The truth of God's Word, His sovereign will, and all that includes forms a body. People are added to it. People are drawn to it because it is of God and it is the only way of salvation.

I would like to point out something quickly here. We usually think of the Church and the new covenant as the new free covenant of God and that the old covenant was more legalistic and all of that. I would like to point out to you that really God created man in the beginning with a free will. Adam and Eve had a very unique covenant relationship with God (if you want to call it that). Of course, they fell from that. They failed but it was an agreement between them and

God where they had the freedom either to do what God said or to choose their own way. Adam and Eve had that and then we have the fall. Nevertheless, right there in Genesis 3, the chapter of the fall, we have the promise of Jesus coming of the seed of the woman. From that point on there were various covenants and stages which God outlined through the Old Testament. In all of them, it was a covenant by the free choice of man and by blood sacrifice, all of which pointed forward to the sacrifice that Peter was talking about in Acts 2. All through the Old Testament, the true people of God were the people who voluntarily committed themselves to obey God and to take care of their sins by blood sacrifice, voluntarily. It was that way the whole way through the Old Testament.

In the Old Covenant, under the Sinai covenant especially, there was more of a legalistic approach. That is true, but read Hebrews 11, all the way through it was the people of faith, the people who chose God by faith that were a part of the true remnant people of God. Not nearly all of them did. Paul says in Romans 9:6 about Israel, "For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel." Not nearly all of the national descendants of Jacob

were remnant people who voluntarily chose to be right with God by blood covenant. God was seeking.

He told them at the time of the Sinai covenant, in Exodus 19 what He was looking to make them through this covenant and through the sacrifices that He was instituting at this time. "Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: (6) And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel" (Exodus 19:5, 6). Then Peter quotes basically the same words in 1 Peter 2:9, "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people." It is by choice, by faith, and by a voluntary choice. While the covenants did change, this principle that man was created as a free moral agent and that God had a sovereign will for man to be saved and to be holy did not. It followed the whole way down through all those covenants right into the new covenant, a choice of faith. Elimelech the Israelite chose Moab, Ruth the Moabitess chose Israel.

Voluntary church membership

will allow us to make a church what we want it to be. However, the true sovereign will of God has in mind a holy people and a way that we can truly be saved. We hold in our hands (may I call it) a “terrible responsibility,” whether or not we will take it or not. To think that God lets us make that choice. However, God is glorified when we voluntarily make that choice. This is in opposition to the idea that He makes robots out of us and we have a doctrine that would teach that God does do that for us and He decides who will be saved and who will be lost. Certainly, God knows that in His foreknowledge but He does not decide that for us. That is our choice.

Thus, the Early Church was a voluntary Church. Those who wanted it became a part of it. Those who did not want it did not need to become a part of it. They were very soon persecuted by the Jewish leaders and even the Romans because they wanted all people to come under their jurisdiction and their laws. These people refused to yield their consciences on the principles of the Word of God. They endured persecution for the sake of the true Church and the cause of the truth.

II) *The historical record.* I will not spend a lot of time on

this but we usually recognize the date 313 A.D.. In the Fourth century the Church continued as a persecuted and voluntary Church more or less. There were certainly divisions in this church and there were differences of thinking and everything. Nevertheless, we mark the year 313 A.D., when Constantine was the Roman emperor. Rome was at that time the ruler of the world. This Emperor finally relaxed persecution and actually turned around and began to promote Christianity. He allowed, for a time at least, freedom of all religions. Later he declared that Christianity would be the religion of the civil government.

Then in 380 A.D. another important marker was the Emperor Theodosius who was also a Roman emperor. He went a step further and forced the Christian religion on all people. I think the reason he did this probably was more for political reasons, political expedience as a ruler, than it was that he favoured Christianity that much himself. He saw this as a way to create what we call a “monolithic” people — to unite a very diverse society into a people that were mostly a light in many ways. He united religion and government to pull the people together. We call that a monolithic society — a

united people. Of course, when the state enforces Christianity, and when he did that, a lot of things changed about the Church. Suddenly many people who had been pagans were a part of this church. It was not by their choice but it was because this would be the type of liturgy that was practiced in their local congregation — the “Christian” religion. Of course, many of the practices became paganized through this.

If you have a State church then we have what you call a “parish” church, where everyone in Lincoln Township (or whatever your township is) goes to the Lincoln Township church. Everybody between highway A and highway B and Route 1 and Route 2, in this block, they go to this church. That is a parish Church concept. That is what developed. Then, of course, came infant baptism. Instead of believers’ baptism they baptized infants soon after they were born. They became a part of the Church not by their choice but by infant baptism. Through all this the office of the Pope was established. The bishop of Rome became the Pope. He was over all the bishops. As this thing became more political, after a while there were conflicts between the kings and the Popes.

We have all types of interesting stories recorded for us in history about the struggles between the kings and the Popes. One that I thought about as I was preparing is the Episcopalian church. They are having all kinds of struggles with these moral issues. The history of the Episcopalian church grows out of this struggle. Henry VIII of England wanted to marry another wife and so he wanted the Pope to give him an annulment that allowed for annulling a marriage and the Pope would not do it. Therefore, he decided that England would establish their own church hierarchy and they would do away with the Pope who did not want to give him an annulment of his marriage. He established what became the Anglican church, and later in America the Episcopalian church that grew out of this struggle. It was kings and Popes struggling for power — far from the true voluntary church concept.

While all this was happening, you are probably well aware that there were faithful remnant churches, true voluntary churches. They were persecuted of course. There were varying degrees of soundness in their doctrine and some of the history on these groups is sketchy. Nevertheless, we believe there was a faithful remnant all

through these years. This period, especially from about 500 A.D. until 1500 A.D. (At least 1200 A.D.) is sometimes referred to as the Dark Ages. It was because of the spiritual darkness that grew out of this mass deception in the State churches and all this wrong teaching. However, there was a small light; the torch of truth continued in the true voluntary church concept.

Then, we come to the reformers. Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin would be some of the ones that are more familiar to us. It seems like these men in the early 1500's began with high Scriptural ideals for establishing a Church back on the Biblical standard. They made reforms to the Church, but they came short of standing up against the authority of the State and exercising genuine Biblical Church authority. Probably you are familiar with this but I want to read from the book *The Swiss Anabaptists* the account of the disputation that these brethren were having with Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich on the abolition of the mass. Zwingli, at the end of this disputation insisted that the Council of Zurich will make final disposition of this matter. He knew that the Bible taught that mass was unScriptural. It was not sound according to the Scripture, but he finally said,

“But the Council of Zurich will decide the matter.” Simon Stumpf uttered his memorable reply, “Master Ulrich you have no right to leave the decision of this question to the Council. The matter is already decided. The Spirit of God decided.” There we have the willingness, and the spirit of the Anabaptists to break with the authority of State churches over the Word of God. They let the Word of God and the sovereign will of God create a Church, form a Church, based on the truth of the Scriptures like the New Testament outlines for us.

Then, we have the record of the Anabaptist brethren organizing, and breaking with Zwingli. Menno Simons, a Catholic priest in Holland also broke with the Catholic church and established a sound and true Biblical church. It was a voluntary church for believers only. Only adults were baptized on confession of faith, and an emphasis on obedience to the Scriptures and holy living. We trace our roots to these small beginnings in Zurich, especially in the brethren who broke with Zwingli in Zurich.

I would just like to read another quote from *The Swiss Anabaptists* in relation to the relationship to these small groups in the dark ages and these Swiss brethren who began this new vol-

untary church in Switzerland. "It is not true to say that after the reformers challenged the authority of the Pope and drew attention to the Word that suddenly the Anabaptists with stricter views appeared all over Europe, but rather before the rise of Luther, Zwingli and Calvin there lay concealed in almost all the countries of Europe, particularly Bohemia, Bavaria, Switzerland and Germany, many persons who followed the doctrine which the Waldensians and other remnant groups had maintained. Their vision was a separate, pure visible Church of true saints, not reforming or purifying the State church system. This is no attempt to prove a physical connection between the Waldensians and the Swiss Anabaptists. Rather, that the rich heritage and foundation of the doctrine of the Swiss Anabaptists was not dead in the dark ages and suddenly brought to life by the reformers, but rather had been embraced by faithful Waldensian peasants and that for many, many years."

God had His Church. We are glad for the rise of these faithful brethren who broke with this longstanding tradition of the authority of the State over the Church and let the Word of God dictate what the Church should be — that sovereign will of God

that we saw there in Acts.

III) *The practical side of this.*

1) One thing that I would like to quickly point out. When we get to this subject of the Swiss Anabaptists and their break with the reformers in the time of the Reformation, we often refer to a work by Harold S. Bender, an eminent Mennonite historian of the middle Twentieth Century. He wrote what is entitled *The Anabaptist Vision*. First of all, he actually gave it as a speech. Bender was a Mennonite historian, but he was a member of national religious historian's group, and he was actually the president of that group. He gave this *Anabaptist Vision* in a speech in Columbia University in New York City in 1943, in the middle of World War II. The essence of what he said in the opening statements of this vision (speech) he quoted an eminent Quaker historian Rufus Jones who said that the Anabaptists were very much the forerunners of shaping . . . A new type of Christian society which the modern world, especially in American England has now been slowly realizing an absolutely free and religious society — a state in which every man counts as a man and has his share in shaping both Church and State." He goes on to say then, in his own words that, "There can

be no question but the great principles of freedom of conscience, separation of Church and State and voluntarism in religion so basic in American Protestantism and so essential to democracy ultimately are derived from the Anabaptists of the Reformation period.”

There is a danger I would like to point out. This is a work of a very capable Mennonite historian and I do not want to criticize his ability as an historian. I do think that he was playing a little bit into the hands of the society whom he was addressing that night to say some things that might have made his church a little more appealing as a nonresistant church in a middle of a war that these men were in favour of and they knew that this Mennonite man was not. I think it is a little bit of an overstatement to claim that the Mennonites somehow influenced this whole thing to get it started. James Lowry, another historian who is part of the Washington/Franklin County Conference, wrote a critique on the Anabaptist vision. He points this out that it is perhaps a bit of an overstatement that we can trace all this free church and democracy even to the Anabaptists. I think that is a bit of an overstatement. I am not

saying all this to criticize the whole work of Harold S. Bender but I think we need to be careful on that point.

The reason I made that point, perhaps not as clearly as I should have, relates to our present practice of taking the freedoms of the US constitution to have churches the way we believe are right. We appreciate that the Constitution of the United States actually (and especially the Bill of Rights) allows for religious freedom. *We do not take the position of demanding those rights.* Sometimes we have this spirit in our day, even among us, where people become somewhat vocal about the Supreme court making wrong interpretations of the US Constitution and it is not according to the Bill of Rights and the original intent of the framers of the Constitution and all of this. We ought to be fairly quiet about that. Our forefathers did not demand these freedoms. We do not have these freedoms today because our forefathers were activists who paved the way for this. We have them because God made a way for people who were willing to shed their blood to do what they believed was right according to their consciences and according to the truth of God’s Word. Let us do the same. That is one thing I wanted to read

from brother Lowry's critique on this.

"I believe that the Anabaptists aimed as something completely different from the reformers in their intent to sweep away the medieval debris collected in the Catholic church. I believe the Anabaptists did not attempt to sweep the Church. They attempted not a reformation but a restitution of the New Testament Church. The separation between the Anabaptists and the reformers was complete as it should be today between their descendants." I think that is right. We need to keep a clear line. We are not political activists trying to remake America according to its Constitution.

2) *With voluntary church membership there is the danger and the need to safeguard against becoming a mere folk church.* Our churches are made up largely of "ethnic" Mennonites (at least here in this country). Some of our mission churches have larger percentages of people who are not ethnic Mennonites or from our background. When we have this (and we want this) we want our children to embrace the church that we have. However, when we do that there is always the danger of simply baptizing all the youth that come to a certain age regardless of the fruit of the

Spirit. In other words a folk church is a church where we simply baptize and include everybody that grows up here basically. That is what it is.

3) *We need to maintain a strong emphasis on a personal new birth experience.* It is the experience of Acts 2, of repenting and applying the blood of Jesus and looking for the fruits of the Spirit. We have counsel before receiving applicants and I think it is right that we are sensitive to the counsel concerns that come about applicants. I do not think it is right for an individual member to stand up against the class, against the rest of the body and withhold the class from baptism, but I think we should be sensitive to the concern. We do not want to become a mere folk church.

4) *We need to have a strong emphasis on voluntary surrender to the body.* Is it wrong for youth to do things that they do not understand or agree with? To surrender to the church? Is that not voluntary? Is that somehow violating these principles if we do things that we do not quite understand or agree with? Did you know that in Acts 15, when the leaders of the church there faced the issue of what to do about the gentiles and the Jews and bring this whole thing

together, the Church leaders did not all agree either. They discussed this issue and matter and they surrendered to one another and they agreed on something. It is noble if we are part of a Scriptural and sound church group that we would also be willing to surrender and voluntarily yield to the voice of the church.

I like what William McGrath wrote in *The Anabaptists: Neither Catholic Nor Protestant* in relation to voluntary church. "The Anabaptists believed in the free establishment and protection of a disciplined church consisting only of born again disciples united in a voluntary, self-binding commitment to the standards and the discipline of the New Testament as interpreted and applied through the brotherhood." That is what we do when we yield to the church. We are willingly allowing ourselves to be bound by these things.

5) *Another point in relation to our present practice is the danger of a wrong view of the church discipline.* We must believe (and we did not look at a lot of these Scriptures) according to Acts 15; Matthew 16:19, the Church has been called by Jesus to extend the principles of the Scriptures. The Scriptures are not complete in applying everything in all areas of daily and practical liv-

ing. God has intended, and Jesus said that the Church was responsible to bind and loose and extend the principles of Scripture in practical areas of life. We are called to voluntarily surrender ourselves to this so that we receive help that is broader than ourselves. If every man does what is right in his own eyes, in the church, then we are limited to ourselves and what we can understand. However, by surrendering ourselves to a church discipline, we expose ourselves to a counsel and a body of truth that is much larger than what we can come up with on our own.

There is always the danger in talking about this wrong view of discipline, to take a legalistic approach to it. Many times we think of legalism as too many rules, and loving rules. However, another definition of legalism that I am thinking of here is that we are very law conscious. If there is no rule against it then we will do it. If no one makes us do something then we will not do it. Our church has had the practice over the years of issuing bishop statements and statements from the churchwide ministry addressing areas that were not necessarily a part of the discipline, but do represent the voice of concern and the voice of the church about current issues at this time. When

we take the attitude that because it is not a part of the church discipline then I can disregard that and it does not really matter, we are taking a legalistic approach. We should appreciate and welcome all the help that comes to us and voluntarily submit ourselves to it.

6) *Another current issue that I thought about is a proper view of excommunication.* At first thought excommunication may not seem to be a part of a voluntary church concept. It might seem that it does not fit. Excommunication is perhaps putting a person out of the church against his own will. Again, though the will of God has determined what the church is to be, when members step outside then according to 1 Corinthians 5, it is redemptive to help them to see that they have stepped outside of the sovereign will of God for their lives. It is redemptive to give them help by cutting off their church membership so that they can see their state and see where they are.

There is one area that I have appreciated over the years about our church that is different from some other churches who are similar to us. We do not use this excommunication against those who do not agree with us. Sometimes there are issues

where people become disenchanted with the church and they do not agree with the way the church is handling something administratively. We have maintained voluntarism in this. We do not take the step and excommunicate them from the church for that. Of course, I am probably on a little delicate ground here with the little bit of time that I have to explain everything that I mean. Nevertheless, we do not take that final step and put them out of the church because they disagree. We have allowed people to establish other churches and had a certain amount of respect for them in doing that. We have not held ourselves up as the ultimate and only church and excommunicated everyone else. I think that is a right view of this idea of voluntary church membership.

7) *We should also have a voluntary concept of service in the church.* If we are asked to teach a Sunday School class, we should do it willingly even if we think others could do it better. I am concerned when a congregation cannot get adult teachers for more than a Sunday or two at a time. Also, we should be volunteering our time for day work projects among the brethren. Occasionally, we should volunteer for a week or more of relief work if we are able.

I grew up “two doors” from a small volunteer fire department. From my childhood impression, some of those men likely were on the fire team for the evening domino games and were not likely very avid fire fighters. Are we volunteering as we should to serve in the Church of Jesus

Christ, or are we merely along for the company?

In closing, we have either the choice of serving self and sin, or holiness by blood covenant in church where Christ’s fullness dwells. “Which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all” (Ephesians 1:23).

Voluntary Church Membership

We are looking at a subject that has to do with a voluntary aspect which touches our hearts, our choices, our will, and it touches us in a very personal way. It is interesting and we do not think anything amiss, and rightly so, but everyone gathered together, and there was an interest to come in. There is an interest to come into the building and get seats. No one used force. There were no handcuffs. There is no dragging anyone in here and there are no guards standing here to make sure we stay in the seats. Our gathering is a voluntary coming in and sitting down with anticipation.

In a sense that is like church membership. No one is forced to be a part of the Church. That is very clear in the Scriptures. It is voluntary. We are talking about voluntary church membership. Briefly looking at the thought of voluntary it has the thought of

one’s own free will, or of one’s own choice. We choose. We decide what we will do and which course we will take. It is voluntary. We are not assigned. We are not appointed. We are not driven to something. It is something that we choose to do ourselves.

I thought of the things that we do, our work and so on. Sometimes we do not have a whole lot of choices in our work and so forth, but when it comes to things that we do, shall I say in our spare time. Maybe some of us have so many things to do in our spare time that we do not have too many choices in that either. If you have free time with nothing really pressing, then what do you do? What you do is done voluntarily of your own free will.

It depicts also a voluntary willingness, a choice from within with purpose, or a free will

choosing. As it relates to church membership, I like the thought of a mind to belong. The voluntary aspect is that our mind is turned in that direction to belong to the body of Christ, the body of believers, the assembly of the saints, and the called out ones.

We are called out of this world and called unto Christ. Together we are blended and built in union as the body of Christ. Those who become Christians will seek to gather together with others of like precious faith. There is a bond established when one becomes a Christian, when one seeks after Christ and finds salvation and finds rest in their hearts. They find an interest also to gather together with those also of like precious faith.

That is a real blessing, and I will probably touch on that a few times. However, the blessing of the Church is often underestimated and not seen as clearly as it ought to be in the time in which we live. When there are so many people who call themselves Christians, and various people who identify themselves as a church, or refer to themselves as a church, it is confusing to some people. Who is right and what is right? Finally, we come back to the Word of God and in there we find the truth. In there we find the pattern for the true Church of

God that is built on truth and on righteousness.

Thinking of the Church, there is a mutual faith where we together have a belief in God. We believe in what He has told us, what He has left for us, and the direction He has given to us. There is a holy bond in the Church that binds us together. It rises above the individual interests that we may have and binds us together on the basis of holiness and purity of the church.

There is a kindred spirit. Our interests are toward God. The mind is to belong. The effort and interest are to contribute. Then, there is a kindred spirit because we are following the one eternal God and His Son Jesus Christ our Saviour.

Further, in the Church there is a common goal. There is the same end that we are pursuing. We are not simply trying to maintain an establishment. There is a purpose in which we are gathered and bonded together in unity and love. There is a goal and something we see ahead. There is something that we are working and labouring for. Together we desire to meet the Lord and be with Him in eternity. We desire to receive and experience that final salvation and deliverance from this world and all sin and temptation and difficulty.

In the Church there is one Head — Christ Jesus. That is very important as we see (shall I say) the smorgasbord of churches. We must keep Christ Jesus as Head. We must have that foremost in our mind and clear, and not be tripped by various other issues that Christ is the Head. He is the one who is giving us direction — directing the feet, directing the hands, guiding our lives, and guiding our body.

Finally, in the Church, there is a prevailing love. It is a love that is not simply a human love. It is not merely a love that only goes to human limits. Rather it is a love that transcends far beyond that. It is love that loves the people whom we meet, even though we do not love the wrong that they do, and the troubles that they are in. It is a love that sees their soul and goes beyond. We see each other in that there is a love for the things of God.

I was impressed with how people today say that they want to be a Christian but they cannot be part of this or that church. They finally decide that it will be simply between them and the Lord. We think of the Church and its importance. It was established by God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Christ is the Head. The church has a place in the life of the believer. It seems almost a

stretch of our imagination when we understand that someone can so quickly set aside the Church and say it is only between me and my God.

We need to understand the Church as it is likened to a body. Christ is the Head and we have the various other parts of the body that each of us find our places in. Then, to say, “I do not need the rest. It is only between me and God,” is like cutting the head off. It is like murder. It really is to the good plan of God for the Church and our place in the Church. The voluntary church membership issue is a very real issue and one that we do well to consider.

Colossians 1:18 says that Christ, “is the head of the body, the church.” He is, as I said, the Director. He is the one to whom we look for guidance and direction. His care is on us and is great. In 1 Timothy 3:15, we find these words, “which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.” It shows to us the very important place of the Church — “the pillar and ground of the truth.” There is much connected there.

Membership is likened to a body. We are, thinking of our own bodies. There are fingers, hands, arms, and elbows. We could simply name a number of

different parts of our body, as well as internal organs and our feet and all that. We are fearfully and wonderfully made. We study that. Then, think of the Church and how God has “set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him” (1 Corinthians 12:18); The Church is unfolded to us. The Church must work in a very harmonious way, and when there is pain all suffer together.

We are thinking of being a part of the Church — membership in the Church. 1 Corinthians 12:12–31 gives us a good picture of the value of everyone, and the value of every part of our spiritual body, and the Lord placing each one in the body as He sees best. This calls for us to wait on the Lord in where we should be, how we look at our brethren and where we think they should be. We remember that it is God who sets the members in the body. Sometimes we think that we could do a better job when we are not thinking right. Yet, we need to remember that God is setting the members in the body as it has pleased Him.

Yes, we realize we are working with people. That is what God is working with. We realize that there are failures sometimes and those need to be reckoned with. Nevertheless, many times when

we really lay ourselves down we can see values in our brethren and in our sisters that on the surface we have not seen. Maybe when our attitudes are not right, or are not like what they should be we question what value there is. It gives us a glimpse of the membership and how important that is to us.

If you are a hand, you are not effective unless you submit yourself to the next brother, or the next member in the congregation. In other words, what use would the hand be all by itself. It is most useful when it is part of the body. Therefore, as we submit ourselves to the body, we are most useful and we find a blessing there.

Several examples of willingness and a voluntary aspect of giving oneself to the Lord. 1) *A willingness to obey and serve.* In Isaiah 6, the message came. “Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts. (6) Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: (7) And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is

taken away, and thy sin purged. (8) Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me” (Isaiah 6:5–8). I see that as an example of a voluntary response to the call of God. It is very important that we have that framework. First of all, when the Lord speaks we say, “Here am I; send me.” We will notice several things about the Lord’s call. When the Lord calls, we have that interest of obeying Him and serving Him.

2) *Submission and delight to do the will of God.* This is an attitude which the Lord can use. I thought of this as I thought of our Lord and how He gave Himself willingly to bring salvation to us. Psalm 40:6–8 says, “Sacrifice and offering thou didst not desire; mine ears hast thou opened: burnt offering and sin offering hast thou not required. (7) Then said I, Lo, I come: in the volume of the book it is written of me, (8) I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law is within my heart.” Do you sense that element of submission, and delight to do the will of God. Built into a voluntary response to God’s call is a delight to do the will of God. That is very important as we think of church membership.

We can too quickly divorce the

call to discipleship and the call to church membership. There is a direct connection, and it makes a difference. Why would we balk at church membership? There is a call. If we hear the call of God and want to obey and follow His will, and we have a delight in following Him then we will respond. I like that as it refers to our Lord and His willingness to suffer, and do the Father’s will. There, in the Garden when He struggled so hard He said, “nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done” (Luke 22:42). He delighted in doing the Father’s will. That is a very basic key to be a volunteer in the Kingdom of God.

In the Church there is a place for everyone. There is a work for everyone, and there is a dependence on the contributions of every individual. We need each one. *The basis of voluntary church membership lies in the fact that God has given to every man the freedom of choice.* We say sometimes that we are a free moral agent. We have the freedom of choice. We can decide to do right or wrong. That sounds good to many people. What some do not like to hear is the fact that we do not have the choice of choosing the results of our choice. Those things are fixed. God has established that.

We can and will choose and we must choose. We will choose one way or another, either directly or by default. We will make choices in life and the basis of voluntary church membership lies in the fact that God has given to us the freedom of choice and He has called us. God has beckoned us with a kind and loving voice — His hand outstretched.

His provisions are abundant and the choice is ours. What are we doing about it? Will we respond to His great love and His care? God does not force anyone to be bad or good. He forces no one to come to Him. Yes, He calls. He waits. He pleads. He tarries long, but He forces no one to come to Him. There is the picture of the cottage door and outside is the Master knocking. There is no latch pictured on the outside. That is rightly pictured because control of that door is on the inside. Therefore, for you and for me, the call is there. The knock is there. The call of discipleship and the call for church membership is there. Will we respond? Will we answer that? Do we look at that correctly?

God will not force us. There is no army that God has to send out and round up people to overpower then and force them to become His subjects. That is not the way His kingdom works. It is not at

all compatible with God Himself. He has no guards making sure that none in the Church escape. That is not the way He works. There are no prisons, high fences, or razor fences to keep members in. No, not at all. It is totally voluntary.

If we are a part of the kingdom of God we are so because we have chosen to be so, and we love it. God, in His love and mercy, has made ample provision for the good of mankind. He has offered to everyone the offer of eternal life through the blood of Jesus Christ. Yet, He does not block our way if we want to leave Him. Think of the story in Luke 15:11–32 of the prodigal son. He had everything he needed, did he not? His father was providing, and yet he wanted his portion and he left his father. I do not know all that he said, and I do not believe that it is simply that he did not say anything. However, but he did not stop him. He did not force him to stay. He did not bind him. He allowed him to go and take his own way.

Likewise it is with God. He provides for us. He lays open the way for us. He has given us the provisions for our spiritual well-being — salvation through Jesus Christ. There are the manifold blessings from fellowship in the church and relating brethren to

brethren, sisters to sisters. Together we relate to each other and build each other up in the most holy faith. God provides all that, yet he does not stop us if we have in mind to do something else. Even though we take a different course and we choose our own way, yet the message that “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son” (John 3:16), is still the same, and “whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

The message that God receives those who come unto Him and “will in no wise cast [them] out” (John 6:37) still stands. Like the prodigal son, when he came to the end of himself, and he thought of his father, and the fact that his father had plenty and the provisions remained, the attitude remained. The offer remained — the whosoever. In John 3:16 we have the word “whosoever.” That in itself opens up the same thought of choice, does it not? The voluntary aspect that “whosoever believeth in him should not perish is open to all, and anyone can come.

Romans 10:9 says, “If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.” Verses like that, one after

the other, are on the premise of a voluntary coming and doing willingly from our heart, not being forced. It is a willingness from the heart saying, “I am finished with sin. I am finished taking my own way.” Wherever we are, whatever relationship we have in relation to God or to the Church, we come willingly and we want to be a part of God’s kingdom.

The very essence of God’s call is voluntary. Revelation 22:17 says, “The Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.” The aspect of being voluntary is so vital in our relationship with God. God gave man the freedom of choice and one thing that it does is provide a relationship with God and His people. God’s, relationship with His people is a very close relationship because those who come to Him do so voluntarily. They choose to. It means a lot to them. They give their all. They take up their cross. They lay down self. They are willing to lay down the old life, the self-life and sin and take up the cross. It is voluntary. It is because they choose, and it establishes a very close relationship.

As we go through life we have responsibilities, duties, interests

and goals. From time to time it is good for us to look at this to help us again re-establish that thinking pattern in our own minds. “Yes, I want to serve the Lord. Yes, I will go on with the Lord. I want to draw near to Him, and allow Him to guide my life. And I want to allow Him to help me to lay off the things that need to be laid off. I want Him to help me to relate to my brethren and my sisters like I ought to relate to them.” We make that renewed commitment.

There is the call, the outstretched arm, as I like to think of it in Matthew 11:28–30 when Jesus said, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. (29) Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. (30) For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” That is such a beautiful picture of that call. It corresponds with Jesus’ looking out over Jerusalem and weeping, referring to the Jews, and how He would have longed to bring them under His wing and they would not. [Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34] Again, it is a voluntary thing, is it not? They would not. He longed to, but He will not force them to. He longs to have us come but He will not force us.

We are not physically born into the Church of Jesus Christ. Therefore, it is not an automatic thing. It takes a willingness on our part to choose to be a part of the Church. One of the reasons we use the term “voluntary church membership,” is in contrast to the State church concept. When you were born you became a citizen of that State. Everyone who was born automatically became a member of the church. It was a state church. Some pressure was put in place to keep people in the church. There were quite severe consequences if you chose to not be a part of the State church. Some of our forefathers experienced that. There were things that they could not go along with. They did not believe they were right and they separated themselves from the State Church, and many gave their lives because of it. It meant that much to them.

The State church arrangement was not a voluntary church membership idea. Rather, it was a mandatory church membership. However, nowhere in the Scriptures do we find that the arrangement is a mandatory church membership. Rather, we have ample Scripture that points and refers to, and implies strongly that it is a voluntary issue, not a mandatory issue. As I said, yes

it is not mandatory but there are consequences of taking our own way, and we have that as one pendulum swing.

The other pendulum swing is, on the other hand, where it does not matter if you are a part of a church or what kind of a church you are a part of, it is simply between you and God. We need to know where we stand. One man told me recently, "I know I do not look much like a Christian but the Lord knows my heart and so it is kind of between me and the Lord and that hidden/secret thing." Nevertheless, the aspect of obedience and walking in the way of truth and righteousness produces a number of questions as to really where such a person is. We leave that with them. Finally, we need to know where we stand. We need to stand on truth and righteousness. That is what the Church is built on.

The issue at hand is very important for us to consider. The thinking that it really does not matter if you are a part of a church or not, it is simply between you and the Lord is being really quite ignorant of the truth. It ignores the Word of God and is quite ignorant of the plan of God for the Church and the function as the body and as a building which are the examples that the Scriptures give.

With every privilege there comes a responsibility as we think of voluntary church membership. Today, when you talk about church membership being voluntary, immediately their thoughts go to "take it or leave it." Yes, it is a take it or leave it. That is the way it is with the Christian life. We can choose to follow the Lord or to reject Him. It is a take it or leave it situation. I think too many think that they can be okay whether they take it or leave it. That is trying to choose the result of our choice, and we cannot do that. God's laws are fixed. Therefore, it becomes rather a grave issue when we think of rejecting or leaving it.

Many agree also with the voluntary concept but they want to tailor the conditions. They want to tailor the responsibilities, and the accountabilities. We cannot do that. Some say, "If I give myself to the church to become part of the church I am not sure that I can give myself to what they ask of me. There are some situations where it may be legitimate to consider that and some situations where the spiritual life of the church is in question. However, in a spiritual brotherhood we are called to submit one to another. Our relationship with the Lord also calls for full sub-

mission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. He is the Head and we see things from that perspective. It helps us to give ourselves to our brethren. People who want to tailor those things are usually those that want benefits without the responsibilities, but we must meet God's terms.

Some of the aspects of being voluntary. I touched on some of these already. There are a number of things that go along with that. 1) *The choice is voluntary.* To be a part of the true Church of Jesus Christ we need to have that voluntary conversion experience where we come to the foot of the cross and lay down self. We confess our sins to God and we do that voluntarily. We do not need to be asking, "What else did you do? What else needs to be made right? Where else? What else are you hanging on to yet?" Of course, there is encouragement sometimes but finally it is that volunteer choosing to follow the Lord.

2) *There is a voluntary commitment.* When we become a part of the Church it requires commitment. This commitment is to the Lord and to the body of Christ. It is not only a submission to Christ our Head but also to the body. That is an aspect of this voluntary church membership. We are committed follow

the Lord. We are committed to work through things that are difficult. We are committed to help our brethren, our sister. We are committed to sacrifice for the welfare of the brotherhood. We have a commitment that does not quickly question our brethren. Of course, we are concerned when there is a pattern established in our brethren, but we are committed to help in time of need.

3) *Our contributions to church life are voluntary and need to be voluntary if there will be a church that is alive.* I thought of the Old Testament with the children of Israel, when it came to the tabernacle and the building of the Temple they gave willingly. That is a part of this voluntary church membership. We are interested in the cause of the kingdom and we are willing to give. We do not say "Well, it is now his turn. I did my share." Do we have shares or are we willing to give as the Lord has given to us. We are a contributor and a supporter. We hold up each other and we uphold the truths of the Word of God. We are supporting the cause of the Kingdom.

4) *We are voluntary in submission.* It is a choice not to submit. For the Christian it is voluntary. It is not forced. There is surren-

der, service, and conviction. I thought of the aspect of conviction. Sometimes that runs a little low and we wonder, do some have conviction? Do they really believe some of the things are important like separation from the world? The Lord sees the willing hearts. The Lord sees those that volunteer themselves to Him and to His Kingdom. Why do we do things? What is the reason that we do the things that we are doing?

5) *Voluntary church membership affects relationships.* It affects our view of ourselves, and others. It affects our view of giving. Think of Ananias and Sapphira and how they kept back part of the price of the land. The apostle Peter said, “Whiles it remained, was it not thine own” (Acts 5:4)? They were acting a lie, and were wanting to have the glory without the sacrifice. There was a problem and it is a challenge for us.

6) *It effects some suffering sometimes.* Are we willing to suffer for the cause of Christ? Are we willing to suffer for the sake of others?

7) *It affects our witnessing.* There are those who are not willing to be a part of the church. Yet, they want some benefits. They are in the church and yet they have a very selfish outlook

in life and you cannot get them off their seats to go and help with anything in relation to witnessing to those about us. It all comes back to that voluntary issue, does it not? Are they really willing to live for God, willing to make a contribution, and have that mind set to do God’s will and to be a part of the Church of Jesus Christ?

Are we promoting voluntary church membership? How is it coming through to our children? We need to keep that clear. It is very clear and evident and we would all like our children in the Church. We must remember that to train and teach as we would every child, whether in our home or not, must come to that place of choice and voluntarily choose to follow the Lord Jesus Christ. If we deviate from that and somehow we corral them into the Church, we are not faithfully building the Church of Jesus Christ. We are bringing into the church trouble, strife and a very downhill slide. If we have that keenly in our minds (and I am not saying that we should not encourage people to give their hearts to the Lord, that is very well in order). We must remember not to crossover that threshold of making choices for them. We go as far as we can but it finally must be their personal

choice.

It was sad, I am sure, and grief for the father of the prodigal son to see his son go. Many parents are sad to see their children go. We must keep that clear that it is a voluntary choice. We must promote in our children and to those whom we relate a genuine new birth experience and voluntary church membership.

Membership in the family of God is very important. It is a great blessing and a greater blessing than we often realize. It is, in fact, the greatest blessing man can realize this side of eternity — that relationship. What are we doing to make it that way? Is it a voluntary church membership issue with you? It finally rests with us whether we will

take that course. Jesus does not have draftees in His cause. He has voluntary workmen. May we be faithful to the Lord in giving our time and our talent in the cause of the Kingdom. The time is short. The work is great.

I was challenged anew with great need in our day to think right about church membership and church relationships that the testimony going out from us would be effective. As people say, “behold how they love one another.” Our mind set to do the will of God will have a direct impact on the witness that we leave in the community. May the Lord help each of us to be a volunteer in the Church of Jesus Christ.

Scripture References

Exodus		John		1 Corinthians	
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The Son of Pharaoh's Daughter

Eugene Nolt

Sunday, February 12, 2006

Millerstown Mennonite Church

Remaining Pillars in the Sunset Years

From a message by the late Clyde L. Mellinger

Sunday, June 20, 1993

Richland Mennonite Church

Children's Book Reprint *continued*

The Little Woodchopper

Then he lifted his oldest brother from the ground, and embraced him with much feeling, also his other brothers. Then his wife and children, who had until now stood around them, listening to the conversation, came near and shook hands with the strangers, making them feel they were welcome and showing them kindness.

When the storm of emotion had somewhat passed William and his wife went to the barn to make it as comfortable as could be done under the circumstances, for there was no room in the house for all of them. On the hay, of which there was an abundance, and by the aid of woolen blankets, they made a temporary sleeping place on which the over-tired men could sleep, but first William asked them to kneel down with himself and family

and thank God for His gracious and wonderful leadings. They all obeyed the request, and William's voice exalted the grace of God which had made the lost ones come to themselves, though through bitter experience; when adding to this the prayer that God might still work in their hearts and give them true repentance, and forgiveness of their sins, then the tears began to flow again from these melted hearts. With the assurance that the God of all grace would answer his prayer, William returned to his house. I do not need to say that there also he fell on his knees to praise the Lord, who had done above all that he could ask or think, and prayed for blessing to come upon his brothers.

“God is love. In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent His only

begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another.” 1 John 4:8-11.

The next morning he began without delay to erect near his own house a plain little cabin for his brothers, they helping him as much as they were able.

In the meantime his wife procured stockings, shirts and underwear; and a tailor was called from the nearby village to make trousers and jumpers for the new arrivals. Until the house was completed they slept in the barn, but had their meals with the family. Regular work could not be thought of as yet, for the poor men were so weakened that they needed care for a good while to come, so that they might regain a little strength.

When the house which, of course, was very plain, was finished, it was fitted out with the most necessary things, as beds, chairs, table, etc. Then William

bought axes and hatchets for them, that they might take up their former work again. The brothers returned the love and care of their youngest brother with deep gratitude and respect, showing it too in their quiet ways and diligence. The two oldest of the five brothers were so weakened that there was no possibility of making their own living, as they suffered most during their long imprisonment and the hardships afterwards; they only lived a few years longer, but went home, believing in the virtue of the precious blood of Christ, which had cleansed them from all their sins. To the others also the wonderful and saving power of the grace of God was made known.

“For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” Romans 5:6-8.

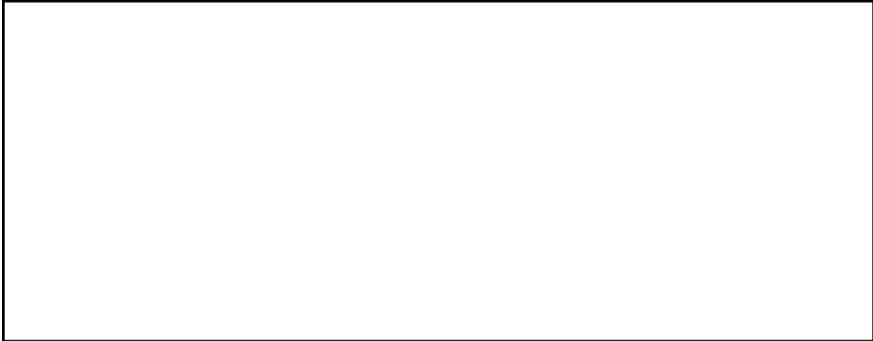
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