

A Muddled Model of Church Membership

Rev. Dr. R. D. Anderson, 23 July 2017

It is truly wonderful when God's people are excited about sharing the Gospel of *life* in Jesus Christ with others. That excitement is contagious. And it ought to be. Does not the Lord Jesus admonish us not to hide our light under a basket (Matt. 5:15-16)? With excitement, of course, we also need discernment. We can always learn from each other. Many of us have heard of the impetus among our Canadian sister churches in the area of Hamilton, Ontario to set up a church oriented towards spreading the Gospel to 'outsiders'. Recently I've had the opportunity to take a closer look at how their model of church membership works. The following quotation is taken from their website:

Expectations of Members.

With a view to the unique goals of Blessings Christian Church, all people requesting membership in Blessings will be interviewed beforehand to indicate their:

- Commitment to being a living and active member of a missional church;
- Heart for evangelism and commitment to being missional;
- Willingness to be trained in matters pertaining to evangelism and reaching out (see c. above);
- Willingness to join a small group (see d. above);
- Willingness to contribute generously to the cause of this church (see g. above);
- Willingness to use their other gifts for the benefit of the missional church.

What we see here is a real attempt to achieve a working and vibrant church which will be able to serve the community of the 'lost' all around us by reaching out in a solid and living way. Unfortunately, in doing this, some of the most important basic principles in what it means to *be* a church of Jesus Christ are abandoned. For what this list of 'expectations' boils down to is a vetting process for membership. Only those brothers and sisters in Christ are welcome in this church, who are willing to commit to certain 'unique goals'. These goals are presented as something above and beyond what can be expected of a 'regular' run-of-the-mill church. The standards are higher. The level of commitment required is higher. Although not intended, what this amounts to is a church for the missional elite. It is as if there are various levels of what it means to be Christian and therefore also what it means to be church of Jesus Christ.

What a far cry this is from what the apostle Paul challenges the Corinthians with! Do you remember the church of Corinth, particularly as it is made known to us through Paul's first letter there? The brothers and sisters in Corinth had degenerated into several groups of factions, which seemed to follow their perception of the ideologies of different leaders (1 Cor. 1:10-17, cf. 11:18-19). Paul writes (1 Cor. 1:10-13 ESV):

I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

Paul's answer to this problem is not to suggest that there ought to be several different churches in Corinth, each with their 'unique goals', but that they must put the effort in to "be united in the same mind and the same judgment" (1 Cor. 1:10). In chapter 12 he introduces the image of the local church as the (physical) body of Jesus Christ. Each person is different and unique and each person has different gifts. One might be an eye, another a nose, or an arm or a leg. But each person is called into Christ's service and therefore each person must work to use his gifts toward the edification of the whole (local) body. The service called for, is a service first and foremost to those whom Christ has already gathered in that place. This, however, in no way precludes outsiders and the desire to bring them in as well, as Paul's comments in 1 Cor. 14:23-25 show.

To come back to 'Blessings Church' in Hamilton. The thing that enables them to select their membership from among prospective brothers and sisters, is the fact that they are a church *without defined borders*.¹

¹ Rev. de Jong, one of the ministers of this church, informs me that the 'borders' are the same as those for Hamilton church.

Should they deny a prospective brother or sister membership, that brother or sister can always be directed to another sister church in the vicinity – a church, presumably, with less high missional standards than theirs.

Let me be quite clear at this point. Every church of Jesus Christ ought to be *both* using the gifts of its members for mutual edification and *also* reaching out with the Gospel to those whom God providentially has placed around them. Christ has made it quite clear that there is no half-way house in the Christian faith. This service to the Gospel is what loving God with one's whole heart and soul, and one's neighbour as oneself, is all about. Half-hearted love must be whole-heartedly and lovingly admonished. Failure to repent compels the church to affirm the judgment of the Lord Jesus that such a person does not belong to him. What I am saying is that in a real sense, *every church* needs to have a vetting procedure for membership. But we do not vet what we think are more appropriate brothers and sisters for our particular 'unique goals', from others who can be sent for service elsewhere. We vet those who truly desire to serve Christ, from those whose 'faith' is found to be fraudulent, when placed before the mirror of God's Word.

This, of course, involves hard work. True believers are never perfect and all of us need to continue to grow and put off the old man of sin as we continually put on the new man in Christ. But this is the kind of hard work which Paul also enjoined upon Christ's church in Corinth.

Having stated all this, let it also be said that establishing a new congregation somewhere and defining its borders does not mean that a young, fresh congregation cannot benefit by qualified and gifted brothers or sisters *loaned* to it by a neighbouring congregation. Is this not similar to the way in which we see Timothy, Titus, Apollos and even Prisca and Aquila used in the New Testament? Notwithstanding, in the New Testament the churches are *identified* by their locality. Paul writes to "the church of God that is in Corinth", he speaks of "the church in Cenchrea" (Rom. 16:1), a village only a few kilometres from Corinth. He writes "to the church of the Thessalonians", i.e. those who *live* in the city of Thessalonica. He orders Titus to "appoint elders in every *town* as I directed you". It is clear that for the apostle, a church is defined locally according to where – in God's providence – its members live.²

The real spiritual danger with the concept of a church without separate and distinct borders is that churches become like a smorgasbord, where each local congregation has its own flavour and attracts its own kind of people. It is then no longer *reconciliation with God through Christ* that brings people together, but a certain style of preaching or worship or – dare I say – ethnic or social background. Of course, the 'Blessings' church does not seem to want to buy into this scenario. Members themselves may not choose to join 'Blessings' church, but 'Blessings' church will do its own vetting. This just turns the same problem on its head. It is still a certain flavour (albeit 'missional') that is aimed at, instead of the body of those 'saints' whom God has called in any given locality – whoever they may be and whatever struggles they may have in their Christian growth and outlook.

Of course, when borders are redrawn for the purpose of instituting a new congregation, it can be wise to be gentle with those, who may for a time resist the idea of joining a new congregation in which they have, through no fault of their own, been 'zoned'. And it is common sense, that outsiders who have been drawn to the Gospel through personal contact with someone, initially follow that person(s) into their congregation, regardless of where they themselves might be living. Later, when settled into the faith, they can gently be eased into that body of Christ's church in the locality where they actually live.

Let us, however, never give up the principle of the *unity* of believers in Christ wherever they may live. That unity must be expressed by active engagement as the one body of Christ in any given locality.

Having a church without *separate* and *distinct* borders is precisely the problem I am addressing here.

2 For a more historical defence of church boundaries, see my article "Church Boundaries: Keeping Christ Whole!" to be found at: <http://anderson.modelcrafts.eu/articles-and-sermons/>