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8 A CONVERTED AND BAPTIZED PEOPLE
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10
11 Raymond O. Bystrom
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13 Introduction 
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15

16 A recent sociological study of the faith, life, practices and
17 institutions of the Mennonite Brethren indicates that about 25% of the
18 people surveyed did not consider church membership to be very important.¹
19 Evidently, a substantial proportion of Mennonite Brethren believe that
20 church membership is an optional extra.²
21

22 To be sure, the larger Christian community also cannot agree on the
23 significance of membership in the church. Positions range from the
24 institutionalists who view it as essential for salvation to the minimalists
25 who take it with "a grain of salt."³ However, the concept of a regenerate
26 church membership has always been a distinguishing mark of the Mennonite
27 Brethren.⁴ Together with other Mennonite bodies, MB's have historically
28 maintained that church membership is an integral part of one's Christian
29 experience and "something never to be taken lightly or loosely."⁵
30

31 Whatever the reasons for the current tendency by some to minimize its
32 significance, it is clear that we need to rediscover the biblical basis ^{through various demonic} ~~of~~ ^{influences - individualism} ~~of~~ ^{materialism} ~~of~~ ^{transformation} ~~of~~ ^{theologicalism}
33 church membership.⁶ Indeed, if we are to change attitudes, it is essential
34 that professional theologians, pastors and lay Christians alike, join hands
35 to reflect together upon what it means to be a member of the body of Christ.
36 The following discussion, then, attempts to make a small contribution to the
37 recovery of the importance of church membership.
38

39 At the outset, it is essential that we clarify our terms and ask, what
40 do we mean by "church membership?"⁷
41

42 Church Membership: Its Meaning
43

44 In the New Testament the word church is used in two distinct yet
45 interrelated ways.⁸ It is frequently used to refer to a community (Acts
46 11:26) or communities of believers in a specified locality (Acts 15:41).
47 Its primary stress on actual gatherings of Christians within definable

1 geographical limits is especially clear in a Pauline phrase like, "when you
2 come together as a church" (I Cor. 11:18). In fact, in the majority
3 of instances in Paul's writings, the word church refers to a regular, local
4 gathering of God's people. According to Australian scholar Robert Banks,
5 Paul's use of the word has "a distinctly dynamic rather than static
6 character. . . . The word does not describe all the Christians who live in a
7 particular locality if they do not in fact gather or when they are in fact
8 not gathering. . . . Its chief importance lies in the way it stresses the
9 centrality of meeting for community life: it is through the gathering that
10 the community comes into being and is continually recreated."⁹

11
12 Secondly, the word church is used to refer to a non-local heavenly
13 community.¹⁰ In Colossians and Ephesians, for example, Paul regularly
14 speaks about a heavenly reality to which all Christians belong (Col.
15 1:18,24; 3:1-4; Eph. 1:3; 2:5-6). Writing to the Ephesian saints, Paul
16 says that God "has made us alive with Christ . . . and raised us up with
17 Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus"
18 (Eph. 2:5-6). Metaphorically speaking, all Christians are gathered
19 around Christ and enjoying fellowship with him, even as they go about their
20 ordinary daily tasks.¹¹

21
22 According to Paul, who gave the word church its definitive shape in the
23 New Testament, Christians belong to both a heavenly church and to a local
24 church. If we were to ask Paul about the relationship between these two
25 churches, he would probably say that each gathering together of each group
26 of Christians in a given locality for the purpose of worship, edification
27 and service is a tangible expression of the heavenly church, "a
28 manifestation in time and space of that which is essentially eternal and
29 infinite in character."¹²

30
31 What, then, does it mean to be a member of a church conceived as a
32 dynamic gathering of God's people for community life, that is, a
33 regularly-assembling community that is a visible expression of a heavenly
34 community to which all Christians belong?

35
36 By member we usually mean one who has been formally received into the
37 fellowship of a local church. But the New Testament knows nothing of
38 "church members," only "members of Christ" (I Cor. 6:15) and "members
39 of the body of Christ" (I Cor. 12:27). As British theologian J.I.
40 Packer notes, "our usage stemmed from Scripture, but has parted company with
41 both the Bible's grammar and its meaning. In Scripture, Christ's body is
42 essentially ordinary folk living together a new and extraordinary life
43 because the risen Lord has touched and claimed and now controls them."¹³ The
44 word member fits perfectly the idea of the body because the body has many
45 members, many limbs. Even a cursory reading of Paul's use of the body
46 metaphor, which emphasizes the identification of believers with Christ and
47 with one another, indicates that "living together" means "living within a
48 network of inter-personal relationships that both lay their claims upon us
49 and invite us to contribute our best."¹⁴

50
51 Therefore, as Paul traveled the Mediterranean proclaiming the good news
52 about Christ, communities sprang up and multiplied. He intentionally

Accountability of members
Formal membership -
inactive membership list.
absentee members -
annual renewal of covenant.

1 brought people into an intimate relationship with God and simultaneously,
2 led them into meaningful, responsible relationships with one another. The
3 gospel that Paul preached connected men and women to one another as well as
4 to God. For the gospel is not a purely personal affair; it is a communal
5 affair that leads people into meaningful and responsible relationships with
6 God's people in a specific locale.¹⁵

7
8 Why, then, does Paul, together with the other New Testament writers,
9 insist on the corporate nature of the Christian faith?

10
11 Church Membership: Its Importance

12
13 Church membership has a derivative significance. It derives its
14 importance from two different but closely related biblical views of the
15 church.

16
17 *W* First, membership in the church is important because God needs a
18 special people to witness to the world. Indeed, the church as a community
19 of people, a corporate body, is crucial to God's plan in human history. The
20 whole of biblical history testifies to the fact that God has not chosen to
21 work with people in isolation, but rather with people in community. In this
22 regard a very important passage is I Peter 2:9-10, "You are a chosen people,
23 a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may
24 declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful
25 light. Once you were no people, but now you are the people of God; once you
26 had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." By applying four
27 Old Testament titles of Israel to the church, Peter stresses that there is a
28 continuity between the Old and the New Testament people of God. Indeed,
29 there is only one people of God. The congregation was the basic working
30 unit in God's relations with the Hebrew people. Indeed, to be disconnected
31 from the community was the worst punishment in their legal system. You were
32 not a whole person if you were forced to exist alone in exile. "There are
33 no Robinson Crusoe traditions in the biblical narratives. You could be
34 damned by yourself but you could not be saved by yourself," writes Eugene H.
35 Peterson.¹⁶ Three basic ideas surrounding the concept of the people of God
36 underscore the importance of community life for the Christian.

37
38 Peter underlines the truth that the church is a community of people who
39 owe their existence and uniqueness to one fundamental fact--the call of
40 God. This call is the heart of the New Testament understanding of the
41 church (I Cor. 1:9; Rom. 1:6; 2 Tim. 1:9; I Thess. 4:7). The church is a
42 group of people whom God has called together. "The most important single
43 thing that can be said about the people of God is that they are there. They
44 exist . . . because God has called them out of nothing and made them a
45 people."¹⁷ Therefore, there is only one sufficient reason for gathering
46 together with God's people and that is to worship God. We assemble to
47 worship because God has called us whether we know it or not.

48
49 Peter also emphasizes the truth that the church is a community of people
50 who are bound in covenant relationship with God and with one another--God's
51 own people. Theologically speaking, a covenant is a promise binding two
52 people or two parties to love one another unconditionally. God has made a

1 covenant for us (unilateral) in Christ; he has freely bound himself to us in
2 covenant love ("I will be your God and you will be my people"). But God's
3 covenant of grace demands a response; love brings its obligations ("I have
4 loved you, I have redeemed you, therefore, keep my commandments"). Today,
5 the church is the covenant people of God, that is, a people who have
6 responded to God's covenant of grace by accepting his offer of forgiveness
7 through Christ and by openly promising to be loyal to him.¹⁸

8
9 Now since this is the nature of the relationship between God and his
10 people, it should surely be the paradigm for relationships within the
11 Christian community itself. God's people should openly commit themselves to
12 one another (bilateral), undertaking to be faithful to one another, to love
13 and to serve one another, and to stand by one another always. In my view,
14 the current tendency to minimize the importance of church membership reveals
15 a profound lack of biblical covenant thinking.

16
17 Further, Peter highlights the truth that the church is a community of
18 people who exist for the world—a chosen people. In the New Testament the
19 concept of election is rooted in the person of Jesus Christ. Our election is
20 only by virtue of our union with Him. We are not chosen as isolated
21 individuals, but as members of his body, the church (I Thess. 1:4-5).
22 Election stresses the quality of life the Christian community is called to
23 exhibit before the watching world (Eph. 1:4). The Christian community
24 is mandated to mediate the mercies of God to those are are without mercy (I
25 Peter 2:9; Matt. 28:19-20). Leslie Newbigin makes this point forcefully
26 when he writes: "Whenever it is forgotten that we are chosen in order to be
27 sent; . . . wherever men think that the purpose of election is their own
28 salvation rather than the salvation of the world; then God's people have
29 betrayed their trust."¹⁹ Unfortunately, many Christians, handicapped by an
30 individualistic view of salvation, see the church only in terms of personal
31 advantage--what can I get out of it? But God has called a special people
32 into existence and it is his purpose to use it for the salvation of the
33 world.

34
35 Second, membership in the church is important because the believer
36 needs a family in which to grow. Indeed, the church is a community of
37 people, a corporate body, is central to God's purposes for the individual
38 believer. The book of Acts contains the story of the birth of the church.
39 The new community of which Jesus had spoken (Matt. 16:18; 18:15-20) became
40 a reality with the coming of the promised Holy Spirit on the day of
41 Pentecost. Peter's message about the crucified and resurrected Christ
42 pierced the hearts of his hearers and compelled them to ask, "What shall we
43 do?" Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name
44 of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. And you will receive the gift
45 of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). And then we are told that "those who
46 accepted this message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to
47 their number that day" (Acts 2:41).

48
49 *collective*
50 The coming of the Holy Spirit meant the emergence of a new society as
51 Jesus had anticipated. "The apostle's word," writes Ralph Martin, "is not
52 primarily, 'Come, catch our enthusiasm and share our joy.' It is rather,
53 'Come, join God's new society and take your place in its ranks.' There is

1 an identifiable body of men and women, not just an amorphous collection of
2 individuals, each professing a religious experience. So the key phrase is
3 "there were added to the group" (Acts 2:41). . . . The church at its
4 grassroots was already a fellowship committed to stay together. Any notion
5 that believers in Jesus could or would live in 'solitary splendor' or apart
6 from the group receives scant support from these chapters in Acts."²⁰ Acts
7 gives us, then, a timeless reminder that the church is more than an informal
8 fellowship of saved souls; it is a community of faith to which members are
9 added because the new life in Christ requires a social context for its
10 maintenance and maturity. Three images for the church underline the
11 importance of community life for Christian maturation: the body, the
12 family, and the fellowship.

13
14 Paul's favorite metaphor for the church as the body of Christ serves to
15 stress the believer's identification with Christ (I Cor. 6:15) and with
16 other believers (I Cor. 12:12, 27; Rom. 14:7; Eph. 4:25). "Paul's
17 description of the community as a 'body' indicates that its goal is not just
18 the creation of harmony between members . . . but also their development
19 towards maturity."²¹ We depend on others both for our knowledge of Christ
20 (Rom. 10:17) and our growth into him. Mutual gifts and responsibilities are
21 bestowed by God's Spirit to every member for the edification of Christ's
22 body (Rom. 12:3-8; I Cor. 14:12, 19, 20). The only conclusion to be drawn
23 is that the Christian life is possible only in a community of fellow
24 believers "without whom we fail to achieve our full stature as men and women
25 'in Christ' (Eph. 4:13)."²²

26
27 The New Testament also compares the Christian community with a family
28 in which mutual relationships are inescapable. "The church at its best
29 reflects all that is noblest and most worthwhile in human family life:
30 attitudes of caring and mutual regard; understanding of needs, whether
31 physical or of the spirit; and above all the sense of 'belonging' to a
32 social unit in which we find acceptance without the pretence or
33 make-believe. . . . God's house shares this character when its worship and
34 fellowship create an atmosphere in which there is free expression of our
35 true selves, always in the hope that we can learn from one another and
36 mature as we grow into our Elder Brother's likeness (Rom. 8:29; Eph.
37 4:13-15)."²³ The letter to the Hebrews may well have been written to a
38 group of believers in danger of isolating themselves from their fellow
39 Christians in the local church. Since the Christians to whom the author
40 writes are brothers in the same family (Heb. 3:1; 13:1,22) and members of
41 the same household (Heb. 3:6; 10:21), he urges them to nurture their
42 precious gift of community, "not neglecting to meet together, as is the
43 habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the
44 Day drawing near" (Heb. 10:25).²⁴

45
46 The New Testament often uses the word fellowship to convey the nature
47 of our relationship with God and with other Christians. The root idea of
48 fellowship is "taking part in something with someone." As God's people,
49 Christians have a common share ("participate in") in God's good gifts like,
50 fellowship with Jesus (I Cor. 1:9), fellowship with the Spirit
51 (Phil. 2:1), fellowship in the gospel (Phil. 1:5). But the Scriptures
52 indicate that any claim to partnership with others must come to

1 expression in generosity and community (II Cor. 9:13; Acts 2:42; Gal. 6:10).
2 The life of the church that comes into view in the New Testament is "a
3 shared or common life which is connected by the sinews and tissues of
4 interdependence and mutuality."²⁵ Fellowship speaks of mutual support and
5 comfort; it speaks of generosity and community.

6
7 One of the constants in the New Testament, writes Charles Kraft "is the
8 need for the conversion-maturation process to take place in community.
9 People are made for relationships with other people. . . . The people of God
10 need other people to whom to relate to assure the direction and nature of
11 their growth. This need constitutes one of the major reasons for the
12 institution of God's groups that we call churches. . . . In this context
13 (of relations with God's people) one's relationship with God becomes vital,
14 habits of Christian behavior are developed, spiritual gifts discovered, and
15 spiritual maturity developed. Woe to the Christian who is not a part of a
16 vital, tightly-knit, sociologically healthy group of God's people, for they
17 are one's spiritual family. Without them one cannot expect much spiritual
18 growth."²⁶

19
20 These, then, are some of the reasons the New Testament knows nothing of
21 the solitary Christian as John Wesley often reminded his Methodist
22 friends.²⁷ In the New Testament God's people are always members of a
23 Christian community for a meaningful and responsible relationship with God's
24 people in a specific locale, far from being a matter of personal choice, is
25 a spiritual necessity.²⁸

26
27 How, then, does one enter into the Christian community called the
28 church? What are the prerequisites, conditions, or qualifications of church
29 membership?

30 Church Membership: Its Prerequisites

31
32
33 Conversion and baptism, "the inside and outside of the same
34 experience,"²⁹ are the two prerequisites to church membership.³⁰ Although
35 the themes of conversion and baptism belong together like treble and bass in
36 music, we will briefly consider these two aspects of the same reality
37 separately.

38
39 Basic to the New Testament is the command of Jesus: "Be converted!"
40 (Mark 1:15; Matt. 18:3). Conversion denotes turning, changing direction,
41 reversing the direction in which one is headed so that one's fundamental
42 loyalties are shifted toward rather than away from God (Acts 26:18; 26:20;
43 14:27; 15:3; 9:1-30; 8:27-39; 10:22-48; 16:27-34).³¹ It is essentially a
44 commitment to God in response to mercy from God and consists of repentance
45 and faith. Repentance signals a radical about-turn in one's thoughts, aims,
46 actions, and loyalties, so that service to God and fellow-man replaces the
47 "me-first" outlook on life.³² Faith, which is not merely believing Christian
48 truth, although it includes believing in the truth about Christ, is trusting
49 completely in Christ and his cross for forgiveness, peace, and life, and it
50 results in a life lived in joyous, grateful, obedient response to God's
51 faithfulness and love.³³

1 Conversion sometimes occurs suddenly and sharply as in the case of Saul
2 of Tarsus who was a determined opponent of Christ one moment (Acts 9:1-2)
3 and a equally energetic advocate of Christ the next (Acts 9:22). At other
4 times, conversion is gradual and quiet as in the case of Lydia who was
5 already moving in God's direction as a "God-fearer" but who one day quietly
6 and calmly "opened her heart" to the gospel message (Acts 16:11-15).
7 Conversion "need not be dramatically sudden or emotional, nor does one have
8 to be fully aware of what is happening. . . . What is crucial, however, is
9 that the marks of conversion--~~faith and repentance~~ as principles of daily
10 living. . . . Thus, the converted life-style is more significant than any
11 conversion experience."³⁴

12
13 The Mennonite historian, John Ruth tells this story: "There is a
14 variously told story of a plain-dressed Dunkard accosted on the street of a
15 Pennsylvania town by an evangelical young man who asked, 'Brother, are you
16 saved?' The long-bearded Dunkard did not respond immediately. He pulled
17 out a piece of paper and wrote on it, then handed it to the stranger.
18 'Here,' he said, 'are the names and addresses of my family, neighbors, and
19 people I do business with. Ask them if they think I am saved. I could tell
20 you anything.'³⁵

21
22 The conversion of Saul of Tarsus is a powerful New Testament
23 illustration of the importance of life in community. He experienced a
24 miraculous conversion through a personal encounter with the resurrected Lord
25 who spoke his name (Acts 9:4-5) and who then set him apart for his own
26 service (Acts 26:16-18). "If ever there was an individual who could
27 justifiably regard himself as a 'special' convert, an object of divine
28 choice and singular grace par excellence and so one who hardly needed the
29 companionship and help of lesser mortals, it was Saul of Tarsus."³⁶ Yet even
30 Paul recognized his need for and dependence upon other Christians like
31 Ananias (Acts 9:6,10-19; 22:12-16) and Barnabas (Acts 9:26). Paul's story
32 as related by Luke is an illustration of the New Testament's insistence that
33 conversion is the doorway to inclusion within the Christian community.
34

35 "Our membership in the church," writes Presbyterian pastor Eugene
36 Peterson, "is a corollary of our faith in Christ. We can no more be a
37 Christian and have nothing to do with the church than we can be a person and
38 not be in a family. Membership in the church is a basic spiritual fact for
39 those who confess Christ as Lord. It is not an option for those Christians
40 who happen, by nature, to be more gregarious than others. It is part of the
41 fabric of redemption."³⁷

42
43 The New Testament unambiguously teaches that faith and baptism also
44 belong together. Baptism followed a personal confession of faith (Romans
45 10:9f.; I Tim. 6:12; I Peter 3:21). While faith without baptism was
46 possible (for example, the repentant thief of Luke 23:40-43) and while
47 baptism was sometimes not accompanied with faith (for example, Simon Magus
48 in Acts 8:9-24), these are exceptions to the rule. Normally in New
49 Testament times, a profession of faith was followed by baptism (Acts
50 16:25-34) in obedience to Christ's command (Matt. 28:19-20). F.F. Bruce,
51 commenting on Paul's understanding of baptism, writes: "It is certain that
52 he did not regard baptism as an 'optional extra' in the Christian life, and

1 that he would not have contemplated the phenomenon of an unbaptized
2 believer."³⁸ Therefore, two dangers are to be avoided: faith without
3 baptism and baptism without faith. For faith demands baptism as its natural
4 expression and baptism demands faith for its validity.³⁹

5
6 In the contemporary church there is often a temporal hiatus between the
7 profession of faith and baptism. Such a situation is undoubtedly healthy in
8 some cases, especially if baptism is being postponed until faith is
9 conscious or until one's conversion experience can be credibly confessed.
10 To allow premature participation of very young persons in the ordinance of
11 baptism is an open invitation to distort its meaning as the mark of one's
12 movement from darkness to light and its claims upon our life-styles. Yet we
13 should recognize that the child who grows into faith in the context of a
14 Christian family is in a very different situation from that of a child
15 coming out of raw paganism. However, when professing adults with credible
16 conversion experiences postpone baptism indefinitely, they are really
17 declaring their unwillingness to submit to the Lordship of Christ. For
18 faith without the good work of baptism is incomplete (cf. James 2:22).

19
20 Baptism is also an act of initiation. The word "initiation" is from
21 the Latin word meaning "beginning," and means reception and entrance into
22 committed membership. The early church selected water baptism as their
23 preferred form for symbolizing the passage of a person into church
24 membership. It signals the believer's entry into the fellowship of a local
25 church and signifies his antecedent incorporation into the body of Christ.
26 "The New Testament idea of initiation," writes J.I. Packer, "is of becoming
27 a Christian-in-the-church. There is no 'flight of the alone to the Alone';
28 we are saved in company, as units in the body of Christ, or not at all."⁴⁰

29
30 Matthew records Jesus' post-resurrection commission to his disciples
31 (Matthew 28:19-20; cf. also Luke 24:46-49). A sane reading of the text
32 compels the conclusion that Jesus envisaged a community of people who would
33 be linked to him by a common allegiance symbolized by baptism. Obedience to
34 Christ demands that we join God's visible community. The Australian New
35 Testament scholar, Murray Harris, writes: "By water there takes place the
36 individual believer's incorporation into some visible Christian fellowship,
37 his public admission into the Spirit-baptized community."⁴¹ Baptism is the
38 doorway into the church. By means of baptism we are united with all who
39 love the Lord Jesus, and therefore his people in a local church (I
40 Corinthians 12:13).

41
42 Baptism, then, has necessary implications for community life (Rom.
43 12:4; I Cor. 12:4; Eph. 4:7-16; I Peter 4:10). "Isolationism in church -
44 sitting apart, not getting acquainted, dodging responsibility - denies the
45 meaning of baptism."⁴² We know what baptism means and we show what it
46 means when we actively love our fellow believers in the body of Christ.

47
48 Preparation for baptism is essential. Converts today do not have the
49 advantage of early Christians who were familiar with the initiation rites
50 for proselytes to Judaism and for entrance into the Greek mystery religions.
51 Baptismal candidates were probably prepared for baptism by being given

1 specific instruction about Christian belief and conduct (cf. Acts 9:9,
2 18f). Traces of stylized Christian instruction for baptismal candidates
3 exist in the New Testament epistles (I Tim. 3:16 and I Peter 2:11-3:7).
4 Later, in the early centuries of the church's history, it was common to
5 require a year of instruction before baptism. The church I pastor requires
6 eight weeks for everyone who seeks baptism and its corollary, church
7 membership. G.R. Beasley-Murray astutely remarks that "the instruction of
8 converts, always necessary, need not wholly precede baptism; much of it can
9 more fittingly come after baptism, and in any case the instruction ought
10 never to cease at baptism."⁴³

11
12 So to become a Christian is to become incorporated into the body of
13 Christ. "No amount of rule-keeping will so incorporate you. Only baptism
14 can effect the incorporation."⁴⁴

15
16 How, then, do we celebrate our common life in Christ and his body?
17

18 Church Membership: Its Celebration

19
20 God's people celebrate their membership in Christ and his body through
21 the two rites of believer's baptism and the Lord's Supper. The two rites
22 together visibly portray the realities of our faith in God, although they
23 differ in that believer's baptism is celebrated once-and-for-all at the
24 outset of one's Christian life and the Lord's Supper is regularly
25 celebrated. Also, baptism is essentially an individual rite administered
26 before God's people, while the Lord's Supper is a community rite involving
27 participation with God's people.

28
29 According to Paul all those who profess to follow Christ are invited to
30 the Lord's table (I Cor. 10:14-22). Of course, in New Testament days, since
31 profession of faith in Christ was immediately followed with baptism into
32 Christ and his body, this would mean that all those who had been baptized
33 celebrated the Lord's Supper (Acts 2:40-42). Does this mean then that
34 baptism is an indispensable prerequisite to participation in communion?
35 Perhaps the best way to respond to the question posed is with another
36 question. If a believer has not been baptized by immersion for reasons of
37 age or health, would we close-off the communion table to him? Surely it is
38 agreed that if he professes to belong to the Lord, then the Lord's table is
39 open for his participation, for in the New Testament baptism is not
40 prescribed as an indispensable prerequisite to participation in the Lord's
41 Supper.⁴⁵

42
43 Also, if there are other believers in our midst who were baptized as
44 infants and who conscientiously believe that they have been Scripturally
45 baptized, would we invite them to partake of the Lord's Supper? F.F. Bruce,
46 a British New Testament scholar, relates a story that pertains to this
47 question: "A few years ago an Anglican bishop of my acquaintance invited
48 delegates to a youth conference to participate in a communion service
49 provided they were baptized members of a Christian church. When it was
50 pointed out to him that some of the delegates belonged to the Salvation Army
51 or the Society of Friends, he amended his invitation to include 'all who

1 consider themselves to have been baptized."⁴⁶ Then Bruce adds these
2 remarks: "I ought not to make it a condition of fellowship (including
3 participation in the Lord's Supper) that my brethren and sisters accept the
4 same interpretation of the Scriptural doctrine and mode of baptism as I do
5 myself, even if mine were the right one."⁴⁷

6
7 A third question concerning participation in the Lord's Supper needs a
8 to be raised as well. Should we invite believers who are not members of a
9 Mennonite Brethren church and who are possibly away from home or on vacation
10 to participate in the Lord's Supper? I want to quote certain things I am
11 afraid to say myself and I am going to let somebody else take the blame for
12 it. "When our Lord instituted this memorial ordinance, he said nothing
13 about his disciples' continuing to remember him thus as members of a local
14 church; nor did his apostles lay down any such rule. Naturally the breaking
15 of bread will normally take place within the fellowship of a local church;
16 but there is no Scriptural regulation confining it to such a fellowship.
17 Unfortunately there is a type of ecclesiasticism which cannot tolerate the
18 simplicity of New Testament liberty, but must be introducing its own
19 legislation and restrictive glosses."⁴⁸

20
21 Nevertheless, the New Testament does place limitations on participation
22 in the Lord's Supper. Some guests, who would normally be invited, forfeit
23 their right of attendance through immoral conduct (I Cor. 5:1-13), through
24 their disobedience to the commands of Jesus Christ or his apostles (II
25 Thess. 3:6, 14f), or through adherence to doctrinal error that causes
26 division (Rom. 16:17; Titus 3:10f; II John 9-11). Further, the New
27 Testament encourages a celebration of the Lord's Supper in a manner that is
28 appropriate to its high privilege (I Cor. 11:27-34). No believer should
29 participate in the Lord's Supper if he has failed to properly "recognize the
30 body of the Lord." As Murray Harris explains, "the context of I Cor. 11:29
31 would indicate that 'without discerning the body' refers to participation
32 while in a schismatic state or harboring an unforgiving and therefore
33 divisive spirit, or to the failure - apparent in selfish or irreverent
34 conduct - to recognize the corporate body or discern that the elements
35 represent the Lord's body."⁴⁹

36 37 Conclusion

38
39 To accept Christ is to accept and to love his people. When we
40 participate in the Lord's Supper we sit in union with one another as family
41 members around a common table, anticipating the day of the final homecoming
42 of all God's people. Then "the dwelling of God (will be) with men, and he
43 will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with
44 them and be their God" (Rev. 21:3).

Criteria *parental influence*

References

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8 ²J. Howard Kauffman and Leland Harder, Anabaptists Four Centuries Later
9 (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1975), 17. Kauffman and Harder studied the
10 beliefs, attitudes and practices of the five largest Mennonite and Brethren
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12 people surveyed minimized the value of church membership. The
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14 MB's surveyed considered church membership optional.
15

16 ³Bruce L. Shelley, The Church: God's People (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books,
17 1978), 60-62. Shelley briefly outlines three positions: the institutional
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20 Making Church Membership More Meaningful (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press,
21 1978).
22

23 ⁴New Bible Dictionary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), The term
24 regeneration refers to "a drastic and dramatic change which may be likened
25 to birth, rebirth, re-creation, or even resurrection. . . . This change has
26 permanent and far-reaching effects in its subject" Also, see Anabaptism in
27 Outline. Ed. Walter Klassen et. al. (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1981), 41-71.
28 Robert E. Webber, The Church in 27 the World (Grand Rapids: Zondervan,
29 1985), critiques the Anabaptist doctrine of redemption and is especially
30 critical of Menno Simon's "radical regeneration" (94).
31

32 ⁵Katie Funk Wiebe, Who are the Mennonite Brethren? (Winnipeg/Hillsboro:
33 Kindred Press, 1984), 35. Wiebe's book has a helpful little chapter
34 entitled, "What it means to be a member of a local congregation." The
35 chapter would be suitable reading for participants in a membership class.
36

37 ⁶See George Shillington, "Church Membership - Option or Obligation?"
38 Mennonite Brethren Herald (14 April 1978): 7. Shillington suggests that
39 the optional view of church membership may be a reaction to coerced or
40 compulsory or involuntary membership experiences of the past. But the
41 reasons for the present minimal view of membership are undoubtedly more
42 complex than Shillington is able to indicate in his brief article. Charles
43 W. Dewese suggests accommodation to the enticements of North American
44 culture (p.9).
45

46 ⁷See Marvin Hein, "Church Membership: Its Essence and Necessity,"
47 Leadership (16 November 1971), no pagination available. A paper originally
48 presented to the Denver M.B. Conference.
49

50 ⁸Most New Testament scholars recognize two primary uses of ekklesia in
51 the New Testament. For example, see Robert Banks, Paul's Idea of Community:
52 The Early House Churches In Their Historical Setting (Grand Rapids:
53 Eerdmans, 1980), 33-51.
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1 K.L. Schmidt, "EKKLESIA," Theological Dictionary of the New Testament
2 vol. 3 (1965): 502-3. L. Coenen, "Church," The New International
3 Dictionary of New Testament Theology vol. 1 (1967): 291-307. W. Ward
4 Gasque, "The Church in the New Testament," In God's Community: Essays on
5 the Church and Its Ministry (Wheaton, IL: H. Shaw Publ., 1978), ed.
6 David J. Ellis and W. Ward Gasque.

7
8 ⁹Banks, pp. 41 and 51.

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10 ¹⁰Following Banks' thesis (43-51). Banks rejects both the idea of a
11 visible universal church usage in Paul as well as in invisible church usage.
12 Coenen (TDNT) agrees when he writes, "the ekklesia can be thought of in
13 purely concrete terms, and any spiritualizing in the dogmatic sense of an
14 invisible church is still unthinkable for Paul" (299). Gasque (IGC)
15 agrees when he writes: "The church of God in its entirety is to be found
16 wherever there is a group of disciples of Christ meeting together in a given
17 locality. Thus, the distinction often made between the local church and the
18 universal church is only an apparent one: each local congregation of
19 believers, according to the New Testament, is, in fact, a microcosm of the
20 whole church" (4). Most agree that the word ekklesia is used to refer to
21 the church in general or the church in its totality, wherever it is located
22 whether on earth or in heaven.

23
24 ¹¹Banks, 46.

25
26 ¹²Banks, 47.

27
28 ¹³Parker, I Want To Be A Christian (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers,
29 1977), 153. Krister Stendahl notes: ". . . the word member is very
30 interesting. It is one of the two words by which we can translate the Greek
31 melos. The other word is limb. We usually do not address Christian
32 brothers in church by saying, "Dear Limbs." We say, "Dear Members." It
33 seems, however, that in the New Testament the word member which we read in
34 the translations really meant limb. That is to say that it really retained
35 its specific meaning of being part of a body." See K. Stendahl, "The New
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39 ¹⁴Ralph Martin, The Family and The Fellowship (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,
40 1979), 15.

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42 ¹⁵Banks, 33.

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44 ¹⁶Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work (Atlanta: John Knox Press,
45 1980), 164. Cf. Herman Ridderbos, Paul: An Outline of His Theology (Grand
46 Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 327-361. Also, Paul S. Minear, Images of The
47 Church In the New Testament (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 66-104.

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49 ¹⁷Five Smooth Stones, 185.

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51 ¹⁸See Johannes Schildenberger, "Covenant," Encyclopedia of Biblical
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53 of Theology (1984): 276-278.

- 1 ¹⁹The Household of God (New York: Friendship Press, 1954), 111.
2
3 ²⁰Martin, 29-30.
4
5 ²¹Banks, 71. "God's intention is not merely the fashioning of mature
6 individuals, but of mature communities as well. The Christian community
7 doesn't exist just as a means to individual ends, though a mature community
8 is an influential factor in shaping the individual maturity of its members"
9 (71).
10
11 ²²Martin, 15.
12
13 ²³Martin, 124.
14
15 ²⁴Raymond Brown, Christ Above All: The Message of Hebrews (Downers
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18 ²⁵Martin, p. 45.
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20 ²⁶Christianity in Culture (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1979), 338. ✓
21
22 ²⁷Brown, 186. Also, see Ben Patterson, "Why Join A Church?"
23 Leadership (Fall Quarter, 1984): 79-83.
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25 ✓ ²⁸Bruce L. Shelley, Christian Theology in Plain Language (Waco, TX:
26 Word Books, 1985), 153. "Consider the matter in a more mundane way. What
27 would we think of a man who said that he wanted to be a soldier, but
28 insisted that he could be a perfectly good one without joining the army? An
29 unattached soldier is nonsense - so is the notion of a solitary Christian."
30
31 ✓ ²⁹Ralph P. Martin, Worship In the Early Church (Westwood, N.J.: Flaming
32 H. Revell, 1964), 60. See also Henry P. Nickel, "The Relationship of
33 Conversion to Baptism," A study paper presented to the Board of Spiritual
34 and Social Concerns of the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren
35 Churches (December, 1984).
36
37 ³⁰F.J.A. Hort, The Christian Ecclesia (New York: Macmillan, 1914),
38 169-170. "There is no indication that Paul regarded the conditions of
39 membership in the universal Ecclesia as differing from the conditions of
40 membership in the partial local Ecclesia. . . . The universal Ecclesia and
41 the partial Ecclesia alike were wholly made up of men who had each for
42 himself believed, whose baptism was for each the outward expression of what
43 was involved in his belief. . . ." F.F. Bruce, Answers To Questions
44 (Exeter: Paternoster, 1972), 181. In answer to the question, what are the
45 essential conditions to be given to a young person allowed to join one of
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48 requires and with which He had declared himself satisfied - namely faith in
49 Christ, or new life in Christ. A Scripturally constituted church will
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6 33 J.I. Packer, "Faith," Evangelical Dictionary of Theology (1984):
7 399-482.
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9 34 J.I. Packer, I Want To Be A Christian, 121-122.
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14 36 Martin, Fellowship, 17.
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16 37 A Long Obedience in the Same Direction (Downers Grove: Intervarsity
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19 38 The Epistle of Paul to the Romans (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 136.
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21 39 See Murray Harris, "Baptism and The Lord's Supper," In God's
22 Community, 20.
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24 40 J.I. Packer, I Want To Be A Christian, 149.
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26 41 Murray Harris, 20.
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28 42 J.I. Packer, 126.
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30 43 Baptism in the New Testament (London: Macmillan, New York: St.
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42 48 F.F. Bruce, 224.
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