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TA Ministries is a non-denominational and non-profit faith ministry founded in 1989 when the book '*To Catholics Whom I Love*' was written by Terry Arnold. This book went through several re-prints and served as a fruitful outreach to Roman Catholics.

In 1996 the ministry became a full-time operation with the introduction of a free newsletter, later named '*Diakrisis (Australia)*'.

Diakrisis is published bi-monthly to *teach, inform* and *equip* the church of Biblical truths and to warn of false teaching. It has also been a valuable reference aid to hundreds of pastors/elders.



Keys to Fruitful Church Life

by

Terry Arnold

Scriptures are extracted from the
King James/Greek Interlinear Bible.

All Scripture is shown in ***bold*** and ***italicised*** print.

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Spiritual discernment can be like the glue that binds people together in likemindedness; or the lack of it can be like sandpaper that causes friction between brethren! We must not major on ‘*doubtful disputations*’ as mentioned in Romans 14. In such matters we are free to follow our conscience and the Lord’s leading in all matters for our personal life, but we are not free to make our conscience a law imposed upon others in areas of Christian liberty.

The Bible is clear - we are to obey our church leaders. And along with all our fellow brothers and sisters God tells us that we must always maintain an attitude of meekness, patience, and compassion with any dealings with our brothers and sisters in Christ. This is the ministry of *grace*!

As you commit yourself to ‘membership’ of this local church, we pray you will be a blessing to the church - to your brothers and sisters in Christ; and that in turn they will bless you, as we all look to Him for leadership and guidance.

We urge you to read and re-read this booklet, assimilate the information and then teach others the truths from scripture found therein.

We pray you will be fruitful and happy in your church life. It is the Lord’s desire that we all be ‘*Rooted and built up in Him, and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving*’, (Col.2:7); ‘*...to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ*’, (1Pet.2:5); ‘*From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplies, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, makes increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love*’, (Eph.4:16).

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Conclusion

The Bible makes it plain that God wants *His work* to be done through the local church. The book of Acts is full of examples of such within the local churches. Thus it behooves us to make a supreme effort to submit ourselves to this institution except in matters of clear doctrinal error and moral corruption. In order to be a fruitful and happy church member year after year, one must not only be saved but also abide in Christ and be filled by His Spirit. The Spirit filled Christian who has their eyes on the Lord will be less likely to quit when discouragement comes or other members fail them. The Christian who is abiding in the Lord and filled with the Spirit will not easily turn aside because their eyes are upon the One who never fails them! Abiding in Jesus Christ and being Spirit filled is the most crucial key to fruitful church membership!

The church is God ordained and a divine institution. It is the place where Christ will discipline His saints, (Matt.18); and where He adds souls to His church, (Acts 2:47). This church has a structure of elders and deacons with various gifts (Acts 14:23; 20:17; 1Cor.12:28).

In Hebrews 10:25 we are both warned and encouraged to '***Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as you see the day approaching***'.

We are commanded not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together whether it be in weekend services, Bible study or prayer meetings. 'Commitment' of members by definition requires them to be present as often as possible when their brothers and sisters gather together. We become members of a local church to commit to the building up ('edification') of the body of believers. We get fed the truths of the Word of God and enjoy the fellowship of one another as we seek to *give* whatever we can for the edification of that body of believers. We do not join a church primarily to *get* but rather to *give*. Yet in the giving we become part of the benefits that flow from the head who is the Lord Jesus Christ.

6) We Must Always ‘Minister’ In Grace

Another crucial key to fruitful church membership is to bathe all of our judgments, ministry and fellowship with our brothers and sisters - in love, mercy and *graciousness*.

Galatians 6:1,2 *‘Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, you which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering yourself, lest you also be tempted. Bear you one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ’.*

Ephesians 4:15 *‘But speaking the truth in love, we may grow up into Him in all things, which is the head, even Christ’.*

2 Timothy 1:13 *‘Hold fast the form of sound words, which you have heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus’.*

2 Timothy 4:2 *‘Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine’.*

2 Timothy 2:24,25 *‘And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves’.*

Philippians 2:3: *‘Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others’.*

God tells us that we must always maintain an attitude of meekness, patience, and compassion with any dealings with our brothers and sisters in Christ. This is the ministry of *grace*!

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Church life is like a family. There are good times and there are not so good times. But there are biblical principles by which we can make church life more *fruitful* and *enjoyable*, not just for ourselves, but for our families and our brothers and sisters in Christ within the local church.

I have prepared this booklet with the intention of it being a blessing and an encouragement. The information has been gleaned from various sources as well as decades of experiencing the ‘ups and downs’ of life within the local church. It is designed to be given to those who are considering becoming ‘committed’ to the local church.

Many people today are ‘hung up’ by the term ‘membership’ and some reject any form of ‘membership’ to a local church. However, the term ‘membership’ is used within this booklet simply to refer to ‘commitment’ to the local church and to those attendees therein. We are all ‘members’ of the church, the body of Christ, when we have truly received Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. The ‘membership’ referred to in this booklet is therefore no more or no less than a *commitment to* the statement of faith, the mission, vision, values and the responsibilities of the local church and its members, as outlined in the various documents of the local church. This booklet is best used as an addition to such documents. It also includes footnotes and references that may lead the reader to further articles or deeper study.

If we see ourselves or those we know, in these pages, let us with grace receive the admonition of the Word of God, as it is applied to us by the Holy Spirit who will lead and guide us into all truth.

Terry Arnold

Keys To Fruitful and Happy Church Membership

Introduction:

There are many 'keys' and principles which will help us to fit into church life and be a blessing and be fruitful as a member of a local body of believers.

Today there are many reasons why people join churches or why people leave churches. Increasingly, many of those reasons sadly are too often selfish and far from scriptural. The reasons for joining a church should be based on the church having sound doctrine and practise, as well as having a leadership whose character is scripturally qualified, (1Tim.3; Tit.1). There should be a commitment to supplying whatever gifts or talents one has to edify the body of Christ within the local church.

Some people leave churches because they have had a simple disagreement with a member or because the pastor failed to do something that they think should have been done. In many such cases the 'commitment' to the church and its members suddenly falls away and one must question whatever happened to the original and scriptural commitment to edify and build up the body of Christ. It is probable that in any church we will find things with which we do not agree. While there may be some valid reasons to leave a local church, there is a scriptural way to do this and to deal with the 'ups and downs' of church life. These issues will be dealt with in this booklet.

Whilst we are to separate from error, we are also exhorted to submit ourselves to pastoral authority and to exercise the ministry of grace within the church. There are many things with which we can disagree in a church yet still continue to submit ourselves to God-ordained authority. There does not have to be a 'contradiction' here.

This booklet deals with grace, liberty and submission within the church, but does not ignore the responsibility to stand for truth and righteousness.

I pray that the following six points, in the context of sound teaching, will be edifying and will enable the reader who might be planning to become a 'member', to be fruitful and happy in church life.

The church member will never find a pastor/eldership with whom he agrees 100%. This would be impossible. We all know this in theory but the practice of it is often a difficult matter. We must recognize that if we are ever to submit to a pastor/elder, it will be to an imperfect one. We must also remember that each elder/pastor may have strengths and weaknesses and giftings that are stronger in some areas and weaker in others. We must realise that they will never be all of what we might expect them to be. The pastors/elders will answer for things that we will not have to answer for, and they have an authority that we do not have.

The pastoral leadership of a church have the major responsibility before the Lord for the teachings, practices, and direction of the local church. The Bible warns that the church leaders ‘watch for our souls’ and that we must not cause them ‘grief’ for that is ‘unprofitable’ for us, (Heb.13:17). If I am a ‘grief’ to my elders, it will surely result in grief for me at Christ’s judgment bar!

The only exception to this submission would be if the pastor/elder is living in open sin or consistently opposing the word of God in some way. Even then, great respect should be shown when confronting that person and this must be done according to scripture, where two or three approach the elder in a humble manner, (1Tim.5:19). The elder/pastor is then held accountable to the entire church and can be publicly ‘rebuked’. It should be noted that the judgement on a pastor/elder or those who teach God’s word is *more severe* than for other Christians, (James 3:1). But surely this is one reason why we are to make their work easier rather than more difficult?, (Heb.13:17)!

Obviously, this does not mean we are to close our eyes to false teaching and sin, but it also does not mean that we are to try to impose our views in all matters upon the church and its leaders. We must remember that we are not the pastor/elder ‘called’ by God to this church.

There will be times in church life when we think some problem or situation should be dealt with immediately or in a certain way. However, we are not always privy to what the pastoral leadership might already be attending to. We are not always privy to all the facts and the circumstances surrounding any situation. It may be that the elders/pastors are aware of a situation and may be waiting for the correct time to address the matter. Do we trust that God is leading the very people *He* has qualified to lead *His* church? In these situations it is best to enquire and understand the ‘heart’ of the leadership in how and why they are dealing with (or not dealing with) any situation. As an elder I have found that too often people base their judgements and reactions on *some* of the facts rather than all of the facts and have simply not approached the leaders to understand the situation from a *pastoral point of view*!

Six Keys to Church ‘Membership’

1) We Must Have An Abiding Relationship With Jesus Christ and Be Constantly Filled With the Spirit.

The first and foremost key to fruitful and contented church membership is so obvious that it is often taken for granted! We must have a real and *abiding* relationship with Jesus Christ.

‘Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can you, except you abide in me’, (John 15:4).

‘And now, little children, abide in him; that, when He shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before Him at his coming’ (1 John 2:28).

In order to submit to godly pastoral leadership and to have spiritual discernment to know right from wrong in church life, one must be born again and thus have the indwelling Spirit of God. Yet, although all Christians are baptised with the spirit at conversion and put into the body of Christ (1Cor.12:12,13), they might not necessarily at any one time be ‘filled’ by the Spirit. ***‘Abiding’*** is somewhat synonymous with being ***‘spirit filled’***, (Eph.5:18).

The ‘Baptism with the Holy Spirit’ occurs once at salvation but the ‘filling’ by the Holy Spirit from within *continues moment by moment* from salvation. It is a *continuous* experience as we yield to the *control* of the indwelling Holy Spirit: ***‘And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit’***, (Eph.5:18). The tense of the word ***‘filled’*** here shows not a one-off second experience but a *continuous* and repeatable action. It is a moment by moment empowering and *control* from within. The same tense is used in 1Thessalonians 5:17: ***‘Pray without ceasing’***. The Greek word ***‘filled’*** is *‘pleroo’* and shows a meaning *to control*. Examples of this are: Acts 5:3: *‘Satan has filled (‘pleroo’) your heart’*; John 16:6: *‘sorrow has filled (‘pleroo’) your heart’*. (See also Rom.1:29; Phil.1:11; Lk.2:40; Acts 2:28). Being ‘filled’ with the Spirit is the Holy Spirit having complete control at any time and continuing moment by moment.

The Corinthian Christians were baptised with the Spirit. Yet at the time Paul was writing to the Corinthians they were not 'filled', but were in fact behaving carnally. They were not yielded to the Holy Spirit that He would have control of their lives and their actions, (Eph.5:18). It is possible for Christians to continue without being filled (controlled) by the Holy Spirit and thus even 'grieve' Him.

Ephesians 4:29-32 ***'Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers. And grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby you are sealed unto the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: And be you kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you'***.

Many church members who cause unnecessary problems in the church or who injure the welfare of the church do so because they do not have an abiding and spirit filled relationship with Jesus Christ. They lack spiritual discernment; they walk after the flesh rather than the Spirit; they do not understand the importance of submitting to authority; and often they do not care how they harm the church. The Bible warns of 'offenses' to others and that God will deal severely with those who harm the believers in His body, (Matt.18:6; 1Cor.3:17; Acts 24:16; Rom.14:21; 1Cor.10:32; 2Cor.6:3).

In order to be a fruitful church member year after year, one must not only be saved but he also must abide in Christ and be filled by His Spirit. When we walk with Christ and have our eyes upon Him, we do not become permanently offended at what man does in this world. ***'Great peace have they which love your law: and nothing shall offend them'***, (Ps.119:165). Today, too many church members quit and become disgruntled or spiritually ineffective when they witness a pastoral failure or some such serious problem within the church. However, the spirit filled Christian who has their eyes on the Lord will be less likely to quit when discouragement comes or other members fail them. The Christian who is abiding in the Lord and filled with the Spirit will not easily turn aside because their eyes are upon the One who never fails them!

Abiding in Jesus Christ and being Spirit filled is the most crucial key to fruitful church membership!

5) We Must Understand, Accept And Trust Pastoral Authority

Another crucial key in fruitful church membership is a Godly and scriptural attitude toward pastoral authority.

'Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conduct', (Heb.13:7); ***'Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you',*** (Heb. 13:17).

It is God's will that every Christian be a faithful, fruitful, contributing member of a sound church. This contribution includes our responsibility physically, spiritually and financially to be a 'cheerful giver', (2Cor.9:7). We are exhorted to obey those who have the 'rule' over us. Many Christians today fail to realise that it is *God's design* to have leaders who rule and pastor the flock and that it is *His desire* that there be submission to *His leadership*. The lack of submission today is partly due to the fact that in the world today there is an increasing rebellion against authority and this attitude has shamefully entered the church arena!

A lack of submission to authority can sometimes be attributed to a wrong understanding of that 'authority'. It is not because a church elder/pastor is a better person that we submit to them. It is rather that God has given a selective gifting and qualification to the elder/pastor. Not all Christians have *equal* authority in this world. Elders have authority *for teaching and the direction of the church*. A lack of submission to such authority is a lack of submission to what God is doing and that amounts to a lack of submission to Him!

The Bible is clear - Hebrews uses plain language - we are to obey our church leaders. They are not to be dictators; they do not have unlimited authority; they are not to be obeyed unquestioningly; but they are rulers.

particular Bible version be accepted as the only correct translation. There are mature Christians of varying affiliations who have wide and differing views on these issues.

We have no right to expect people to have the same personal convictions unless the specific conviction is clearly and explicitly addressed in Scripture? If the area is not explicitly addressed in scripture, then as the church reads and preaches Scripture expositively we must *trust the Holy Spirit* to address the real *scriptural issues* that may be attached to these issues, such as idolatry, time wasting or selfishness, etc. We must not use selective Scriptures (out of context) in attempt to prove the evil of any such things. Such would not be ‘Sola Scriptura’*, but a legalistic counterfeit to the true work of the Holy Spirit. It has been said that ‘Legalism’ is someone or something taking the place of the Holy Spirit. **

The Bible alone is our *authority* in all things spiritual. The Holy Spirit is the *administrator/interpreter*. If we want Holy Spirit conviction in peoples hearts we must trust the Holy Spirit and Scripture to do whatever might (or might not) be done in peoples lives. If we want people to stop doing something we must show them it is wrong from *explicit* Biblical texts alone *and Scripture must be the starting point*. Otherwise such things would be just our ‘personal opinion’.

We must not major on ‘*doubtful disputations*’ as mentioned in Romans 14. In this passage it is clear *we are not to judge people on matters that are not clearly taught in scripture*. When the Scripture speaks plainly, we must speak; but when the Scripture has no plain word, we have no authority to speak. In such matters we are free to follow our conscience and the Lord’s leading in all matters pertaining to our personal life, but we are not free to make our conscience a law to be imposed upon others in areas of Christian liberty.

* ‘Sola Scriptura’ is the phrase adopted by the Reformation leaders. It means that all we need to know for doctrine and the spiritual life is found only in the Bible.

** For a deeper study of ‘Legalism’ see authors sermon and articles on ‘Legalism’.

2) We Must Understand The Importance Of The ‘Church’

The church is God ordained and a divine institution. It is the place where Christ will discipline His saints, (Matt.18); and where He adds souls to His church, (Acts 2:47). This church has a structure of elders and deacons with various gifts (Acts 14:23; 20:17; 1Cor.12:28).^{*} Whether it be in houses or buildings, Christians should consistently gather together in one place, (1Cor.11:18,22). A believer should never be content merely to listen to preaching sermons on tape or even to meet together with a loose-knit group of believers without proper leadership and organization. In some cases this may be the only option, but every effort should be made to find a local church which has sound teaching and the oversight of qualified leaders.

There are many professing Christians who wander from church to church or are not a part of any local church. Many of these have little or no accountability and little discipline. They live separate to the unique fellowship and growing mechanisms that are involved in a local church as ordained by the Holy Spirit and illustrated in the pages of the book of Acts. Membership in an invisible Church *without participation and activity in its local expression* is contrary to the pages of the New Testament.

In Hebrews 10:25 we are both warned and encouraged to ‘***Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as you see the day approaching***’.

As Christians we are to be committed to bearing one another’s burdens, (Gal.6:2); to exhort one another, (Heb.3:12-14); to assemble together, (Acts 20:7; Heb.10:24-25); to serve one another with whatever abilities we have, (1Pet.4:10-11); to care for one another, and to seek peace, (1Thess.5:11- 15).

The strength and *commitment* of any local church is usually seen in the response to prayer meetings. It is indicative of the times that in most churches the attendance at prayer meetings is small. Yet we are commanded not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together whether it be in weekend services, Bible study or prayer meetings. The

* Some churches with smaller numbers may not have a plurality of elders and the minister may assume the role of an ‘elder’.

‘commitment’ of members by definition surely requires them to be present *regularly* as often as possible when their brothers and sisters gather together. This commitment includes giving of our time, our gifts and our finances to support the smooth running of the church. This should not be a legalistic bondage but a joy in that it will be an opportunity to learn God’s ways, to fellowship with His people and to see His church members ‘exhorted’ as the coming of the Lord draws closer! (Heb.10:25)

The church is a place for the glory of God to be revealed, (Eph.3:21; 5:27); it is ***‘the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth’***, (1Tim.3:15).

The very expression of his ‘body’ is realised and played out in the local church gatherings. There are hundreds of references to the church in the New Testament and *most of those references are to the local church*.

The local church is God’s means of accomplishing His purposes in this age. The entire life and work of God’s people for this age appears in the context of the local assembly.

A proper New Testament church has certain biblical ingredients. It is a body of believers who are congregated together under the oversight of qualified elders and following the apostles teaching and work as described in the epistles.

The church is primarily made up of, and is for, *the saints*. The Greek word ‘*ekklesia*’ may be interpreted variously as an ‘assembly’, ‘the body of Christ’, a ‘community’ of believers, or as ‘the bride of Christ’. The general meaning is ‘the called out ones’.

The church is not composed of unbelievers. *Church services are not primarily to cater for the unsaved!* This does not mean that we will not have unbelievers attend church services, but the primary focus is to teach and equip *the saints* as we worship and glorify Christ who is the head of that body of believers. Any unbelievers in attendance at services will simply come under the influence of the Holy Spirit, the Word of God and the testimony of the saints. It is the Lord who adds souls to the church, (Acts 2:47).

4) We Must Exercise Spiritual Discernment and Distinguish Between The Important (Doctrines) And The Less Important (Preferences):

Spiritual discernment can be like the glue that binds people together in like-mindedness; or the lack of it can be like sandpaper that causes friction between brethren!

The Pharisees lacked discernment and were emphasising the wrong preferences. Jesus said to them: ***‘Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought you to have done, and not to leave the other undone’***, (Matt.23:23). Not all things in the Bible are of equal importance. Some teachings are ‘weightier’ than others. Everything in the Bible has some importance, but everything is not of equal importance. Knowing the difference between the two requires a thorough knowledge of God’s Word and spiritual discernment. Such discernment comes only through diligent study and through exercising the spiritual senses ***‘to discern both good and evil’***, (Heb.5:12-14).^{*} We need to have a searching ‘Berean mind’ (Acts 17:11) and develop a ‘study habit’ (2Tim.2:15).

In all ‘discernment’ there needs to be a *balance in truth*. We should thus ‘major on the majors and minor on the minors’. We must know which ‘hills to die on’ and which hills are not worth ‘dying on’. Be sure before you conclude on anything. James 1:19 is a good guide: ***‘...be swift to hear, slow to speak...’***.

Scripture is our guide. There are issues where we may have a strong view or a ‘preference’. Our doctrine should all be preferences. But our ‘preferences’ may not all be doctrinal. Some areas such as homosexuality and adultery are clearly defined as absolutes in scripture and dealt with as sin. But many other areas are not so explicitly defined, such as: Christians and alcohol, Christmas traditions, Christian dating, contraception/ or pro-creative sex only; Christian vs Public schooling; the demanding that women wear head-coverings; Christians be re-baptised if were baptised in another church; the use of TV, the computer, internet, competitive sport, etc; or a requirement that a

^{*} For a deeper study of ‘Discernment’ see authors sermon and articles on ‘Discernment’

To obey elders requires submission. Submission requires humility. Yet these characteristics *of salvation* are increasingly foreign to numbers of professing Christians who live the church life with a selfish independence that does nothing for the edification of the church body.

Of course there are elders who are ungodly and may not be qualified. They can be confronted. This must be done *according to scripture* where two or three approach the elder in a humble manner, (1Tim.5:19). Usually the problem will be evident by many, including those within the leadership.

Ministers too can develop a ‘CEO’ mentality, lording it over the people (1Pet.5:3), ‘driving’ the people instead of ‘leading’. Some leaderships may be arrogant and controlling. That will invite justifiable criticism. But the criticisers must also, despite these manners, look at what is actually being said - is it truth?

If you remain a faithful member of the local church for many years, it will not be because you have found perfect pastors/elders in the perfect church, but because you know this is God’s will and anything less would displease Him!

3) We Must Understand This Is No Perfect Church

We see in the pastoral epistles and especially in the Corinthian church, that in the early churches there were difficulties. These churches were far from perfect. The members of the church at Corinth were behaving carnally, were divided, refused to discipline unruly members, were taking each other to courts, misusing gifts and even getting drunk!

And out of the seven churches mentioned in the book of Revelation only one was commended by the Lord.

There are times when there will be contentions within the church (Gal.2:11-14; Acts 15:39). The reason for this is that all Christians have a ‘war’ going on within them between the flesh and the Spirit, (Rom.7:23). Sometimes the flesh may have sway and the church is disrupted for a time.

Why we ‘join’ this church

Western Christianity is increasingly adopting the selfish consumerist independence of this age. The unspoken mentality is ‘I have rights’ or ‘the church must meet my needs’. But the choicest people I have found in church life are rather those who come to see what they can *give* rather than what they can *take*! They are meek, ready to help, respectful of authority, slow to speak, quick to listen and usually busy giving out whatever gift they have for the *edification of others*. Every single Christian baptised into the body of Christ has at least one gift *which is supposed to be used for the building up of the church*! (1Cor.12; Rom.12:4-8)

We become members of a local church to commit to the ‘building up’ (‘edification’) of the body of believers. We join a church that is sound in doctrine and has a Godly and qualified leadership. We thus get fed the truths of the Word of God and enjoy the fellowship of one another as we seek to *give* whatever we can for the edification of that body of believers.

We do not join a church primarily to *get* but rather to *give*. Yet in the giving we become part of the benefits that flow from the head - the Lord Jesus Christ.

How not to leave a church

Many complain that church leaders are not shepherding in the way they think this should be done. They have not been ‘visited’ lately; or they reject counselling when it is given (sometimes because it did not produce the ‘result’ intended); or they did not get what they wanted in the church. Many attack Pastor/elders for not ‘pastoring’ without realising that every time they preach, teach and counsel, they are ‘pastoring’!

Part of the problem is that today’s Christians too often want instant results in a ‘fast food’ church. They exhibit the impatience and fleshly ways of the world. They have adopted a spiritual lifestyle of a tourist and only want the best spots to visit. They feast on milk and reject the strong meat of high doctrine.

Some of the reasons why people get upset and leave churches today show the spirit of the age. They leave because they have not been ‘visited’ or no one has phoned them in their trials; they have had a disagreement with another member; they have rejected correction by an elder and taken offence; or just because they don’t feel they ‘fit in’, etc. This can lead to a perception of being rejected in some way or a lack of care being shown. This *feeling* accompanying the perception may be real but the rejection itself can be a judgement that may not be necessarily true.

Some excuses for leaving a church may be valid and may be indicative of a problem with the leadership or the church as a whole. But the problem too often is not that there may be a valid reason, but rather *the way or how it is commonly addressed*. Too many people leave without saying anything to the leadership or the person concerned, or they suddenly inform the leadership they are leaving *without giving them any opportunity to rectify the problem. Then the person leaving becomes part of the problem rather than a part of the solution*. This behaviour is selfish and sinful and shows a lack of regard for the leadership and the local body of Christ as a whole! This ultimately shows a lack of regard for Christ’s body and thus Christ Himself.

The minister is not a mind reader and sometimes will not be aware of problems unless informed. We do not usually leave our own earthly families in such a fashion, yet many will so quickly exit the local family of God and leave them with the problem!

Far too many people leave churches over personality clashes and offences rather than *doctrine*! Yet the Bible gives clear direction (Matthew 18 and other verses) in how to deal with such offences and disagreements. We are told to lovingly face the person who has offended us (Matt.18:15) and attempt to ‘*gain a brother*’. If that brings no reconciliation then we are commanded to bring one or two witnesses and further lovingly attempt to reconcile the offense or the fault, (vs.16). If this is unsuccessful then the ‘church’ has to deal with the matter. The pastor/elders are the ruling body of the church (1Tim.5:17; Heb.13:7,17) and authority is vested in them to make a ruling and reconcile the issue.

It must also be said that it is wise to pray about such matters before embarking on Matthew 18. There are many times when we can pass over a transgression and allow grace and the Holy Spirit to work in other peoples lives. ‘*The discretion of a man defers his anger; and it is his glory to pass over a transgression*’, (Pr.19:11). Prayer can often take the offense away or change our own hearts.

Commitment to the local church as members requires a commitment in good *and bad times*, in problems and in offences! Unless the church is in serious doctrinal error or the leadership is ungodly, there should be few if any reasons for leaving the family *that God has once placed you in*! Even where the doctrine is in serious error, every effort should be made to dialogue with the leadership and work the problem through, *before* leaving to find another sound fellowship.

The Bible exhorts all to ‘*Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you*’, (Heb.13:17). Many people have never thought what it is like to be a faithful elder/pastor and to have to face the Lord to give account for His sheep, especially when the sheep suddenly exit or are not lovingly communicating. How much more difficult it is for ministers to ‘watch over’ people’s souls and to ‘give an account’ when there is no communication, reciprocal accountability or transparency?