

IN RESPONSE – CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

by Dennis Prutow

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What does church membership have to do with discipleship? What do membership vows have to do with a proper relationship with Christ? Does the New Testament require anything more than a confession of faith for membership in the body of Christ? These and other similar questions are at the forefront of a debate concerning church membership and requiring of special vows to enjoy the privileges of such membership. In this series of articles, we will explore the necessity and propriety of church membership and the appropriateness of extensive requirements for church membership.

Acts 11:19-26 tells how the church was established in Antioch.

So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and *began* speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord. The news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch. Then when he arrived and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and *began* to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain *true* to the Lord; for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And considerable numbers were brought to the Lord. And he left for Tarsus to look for Saul; and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And for an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.

The first wave of converts leaving Jerusalem because of persecution had scruples against speaking the truth of God to any but Jews (Acts 11:19). Second generation converts did not share this prejudice. They freely presented the gospel to Greeks (Acts 11:20). So it was

that there were both Jew and Gentile converts in Antioch (Acts 11:21). When the apostles heard the reports of conversions in Antioch, they sent Barnabas to investigate (Acts 11:22).

Barnabas saw the grace of God at work, encouraged the new converts, continued the evangelistic work, and saw further conversions to Christ (Acts 11:23-24). Barnabas then went to Tarsus to find Paul to help with the work in Antioch (Acts 11:25).

A significant change takes place at verse 26. From verses 19-25 Acts speaks of large numbers turning to Christ. We see converts. In Acts 11:26 the text speaks of the church, of disciples, and of Christians. When Paul enters the scene, the church emerges and the converts are called disciples. What does this shift in terminology mean?

First, we may ask, Were these converts baptized? The text does not indicate they were. However, Christ commanded baptism. "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20).

We mention two things. One, becoming disciples demands baptism. Two, there is no reason to think an apostle of Christ would do anything but obediently follow the command of Christ. If converts are called disciples, and if becoming a disciple involves baptism, we properly assume the converts at Antioch who become disciples are baptized.

Second, we ask, What is the meaning of baptism in the context of our discussion? Acts 2:41-42 gives us an answer. "So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." Those who received the word of the gospel from the mouth of Peter were baptized. They were added to the number of the disciples in Jerusalem by way of baptism. That is, they were added

to the visible church and distinguished from the world through baptism. The situation parallels the one in Antioch.

Discipleship involves baptism. It also entails teaching. In both the cases before us, converts are baptized and enter a period of teaching. They become disciples.

Another term for disciple is apprentice. An apprentice associates himself with a master for a specific period of time for the purpose of learning a trade from the master. In the case of Christianity, the master is Jesus Christ. Men and women become apprentices under the tutelage of Christ when baptized. They enter a time of teaching that lasts all their lives. The trade disciples learn is the Christian life.

In Acts 11:19-26, converts become a church when they are organized into a visible body. Believers are baptized and enter into discipleship under the teaching of Barnabas and Paul.

The additional twist in the story is the final statement of Acts 11:26. "And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch." *Disciples are called Christians*. That is, it is not simply converts who are called Christians. Baptized converts entering into discipleship are recognized as Christians. Disciples are called Christians.

Too often we see men and women "converted" to faith in Christ at evangelistic meetings. Many of these men and women never associate themselves with the visible body of Christ. They never submit to baptism, thus entering the visible church, and becoming disciples. On the basis of 11:19-26, we ask, Can these people call themselves Christians?

From this short study, we assert that membership in the visible church is essential to discipleship. Since this is the case, the church ought to be the primary support group and the primary accountability group of every disciple and Christian. We may therefore also assert, without reservation, that membership in the visible church is essential to Christianity.

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IN RESPONSE – A COVENANT OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP, PART ONE

by Dennis Prutow

If, as we have asserted, church membership is essential to Christianity, is there warrant to require men and women to assent to a covenant and to agree with certain terms of membership? If so, how extensive may these terms of membership be? Or is a simple confession of faith in Christ all that we may properly require of men and women when they become members of the visible church? We will attempt to answer these questions in this and the following studies.

We begin with the children of Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai. God instructed Moses to speak to the people as follows,

In the third month after the sons of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. When they set out from Rephidim, they came to the wilderness of Sinai and camped in the wilderness; and there Israel camped in front of the mountain. Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the sons of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself. Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel" (Exodus 19:1-6).

God brought Israel out of Egypt to form them into a covenant community. As in the case of those at Antioch, the converts were organized into a visible church. Here the deliverance or salvation of Israel was the prelude to their becoming a covenant community. The parallel seems clear.

God promises the people several things based upon His acts of deliverance. Of all the nations on the face of the earth, Israel is to be God's possession. How does God expound this idea? Israel is to be a kingdom of priests. Israel is to be a *kingdom*. That is, the nation is to follow the rule and law of God, her only

King and Master. Israel is also to be a kingdom of *priests*. God intends Israel to be a light to the gentiles and lead all the nations of the earth to God. This is the task of priests.

In so doing, Israel is to be a holy nation. That is, Israel, as a nation, is set aside by God for the special purpose of leading all humanity to the throne of the Majesty on High. This is Israel's purpose and calling.

In this context, Israel is bound to God by covenant. God saves Israel for a majestic purpose. In turn, Israel displays her thanks and praise to God by following her calling and fulfilling her purpose.

Notice how God speaks these things in terms of covenant. "Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:5-6). Keeping covenant with God displays, of a certainty, that Israel is God's possession.

As mentioned above, there is a parallel between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church. The church in the New Testament is also the fulfillment of God's words to ancient Israel. The apostle Peter makes this clear in his first epistle. Peter writes to Christians, to those "who are chosen" (1 Peter 1:1) and who are "born again" (1 Peter 1:3). These Christians are also organized. He exhorts their "elders" to "shepherd the flock of God" (1 Peter 5:1-2). Peter also urges subjection to the elders (1 Peter 5:5).

Peter says of these organized Christians, "You are a CHOSEN RACE, A ROYAL PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God's OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). The reference is to Exodus 19. The Church of Jesus Christ is a royal priesthood [a kingdom of priests], a holy nation, a people for God's possession. This was God's design for Israel. Peter tells us God fulfills His plan in the New Testament church.

Since the New Testament Church is the fulfillment of God's intention for the

covenant community of Israel, the church in the New Testament is also a covenant community. Christ Himself makes this clear. Followers of Christ are "chosen" and "sprinkled with His blood" (1 Peter 1:1-2). In a central ordinance of the Christian church, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, Jesus Christ presents Himself and says of the fruit of the vine, "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20). The blood of Jesus Christ, the blood by which Christians have deliverance from sin, is the blood of the covenant. Converts organized as Christian churches are in covenant with God through Jesus Christ. From this perspective, the church in the New Testament is also the fulfillment of God's plan for ancient Israel.

Finally, the church fulfills the calling and purpose of Israel in its implementation of the Great Commission. Matthew 28:19-20 commands, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." This parallels the perspective of the apostle Peter. Notice the purpose of this holy nation and kingdom of priests according to 1 Peter 2:9. It is to declare the excellencies of her Savior, deliverer, and Lord.

Christ calls His church to disciple the nations. As a holy nation itself, the church is set aside by God to proclaim His greatness, His deliverance, and His salvation. As a kingdom of priests, the church has the calling and purpose of leading men and women out of the darkness of the world and into light of God's marvelous presence. This fulfills Israel's purpose and calling to be a "light of the gentiles" (Isaiah 49:6, Acts 13:47).

We therefore rightly declare the church in the New Testament fulfills the calling and purpose of ancient Israel. She is the modern covenant people of God. She is the holy nation in the world. She is set apart to lead the world to God.

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IN RESPONSE – A COVENANT OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP, PART TWO

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We now turn to Exodus 20 and following. Once God brought Israel before Mount Sinai and issued His covenant proposal through Moses, He proceeded to set forth the covenant itself. He gave Israel the Ten Commandments.

Then God spoke all these words, saying, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol.... You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain. Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.... Honor your father and your mother.... You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet..." (Exodus 20:1-17).

Exodus 34:4 declares of these Ten commandments, "So he was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights; he did not eat bread or drink water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments." Deuteronomy 4:7 adds, "So He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, *that is*, the Ten Commandments." Can it be clearer? This is God's covenant with Israel.

In the remainder of Exodus 20, plus chapters 21, 22, and 23, God explains and illustrates the Ten Commandments. God details the covenant and the stipulations of the covenant.

Exodus 20:22-26 reiterates the Second Commandment and outlines Israel's worship. "You shall not make *other gods* besides Me; gods of silver or gods of gold, you shall not make for yourselves" (Exodus 20:23). "If you make an altar of stone for Me, you shall not build it of cut stones, for if you wield your tool on it, you will profane it" (Exodus 20:25).

Exodus 21:1-11 outlines God's will for Hebrew slaves, the redemption of slaves and the conjugal rights of slaves. These matters pertain to the Fifth and Seventh Commandments.

Exodus 21:12-27 gives guidance regarding various aspects of the Sixth and

Eighth Commandment including words about man stealing, manslaughter, and miscarriages caused by fighting. The remainder of Exodus 21 states the requirements relating to injury caused by an animal or injury to an animal. These laws expound the Sixth Commandment.

Exodus 22:1-15 speaks of property rights, the Eighth Commandment. Exodus 22:16 through 23:9 deals with various other issues of covenant life. There are laws under the heading of the Seventh commandment. "If a man seduces a virgin who is not engaged, and lies with her, he must pay a dowry for her *to be his wife*" (Exodus 22:16). "Whoever lies with an animal shall surely be put to death" (Exodus 22:19).

There are laws relating to the Ninth Commandment. "You shall not bear a false report; do not join your hand with a wicked man to be a malicious witness. You shall not follow the masses in doing evil, nor shall you testify in a dispute so as to turn aside after a multitude in order to pervert *justice*" (Exodus 23:1-2).

In Exodus 23:10-19 God places emphasis on Sabbath rest, the three feasts of Israel, and the importance of proper sacrifices. "You shall sow your land for six years and gather in its yield, but *on* the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the needy of your people may eat; and whatever they leave the beast of the field may eat. You are to do the same with your vineyard *and* your olive grove" (Exodus 23:10-11).

Finally God promises He will be with the people through the presence of an angel. "Behold, I am going to send an angel before you to guard you along the way and to bring you into the place which I have prepared. Be on your guard before him and obey his voice; do not be rebellious toward him, for he will not pardon your transgression, since My name is in him (Exodus 23:20-21).

Here is what we have. God sets forth His covenant in brief with the Ten Commandments. Then He explains the covenant more thoroughly in Exodus 20, 21, 22, and 23. The many duties and responsibilities He gives to Israel are in many ways overwhelming. From another perspective, this litany of duties is gracious.

God specifically outlines the life of His people. He removes many questions.

Exodus 21, 22, and 23 are frequently called the Book of the Covenant. When Moses inaugurated the covenant with the blood of sacrifice, he read this book to the people. "Then he took the book of the covenant and read *it* in the hearing of the people; and they said, 'All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!'" (Exodus 24:7).

We will examine Exodus 24 next. For now, it is sufficient to note that the proposal set before Israel by Moses at Mount Sinai as God entered into covenant with the people was at least the content of Exodus 20, 21, 22, and 23. We must allow this truth to soak into our thinking.

The fifth question of the Covenant of Church Membership in the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America reads as follows. "To the end that you may grow in the Christian life, do you promise that you will diligently read the Bible, engage in private prayer, keep the Lord's day, regularly attend the worship services, observe the appointed sacraments, and give to the Lord's work as He shall prosper you?" For many, this question is overbearing. It asks too much. Yet there is nothing here beyond the requirements of Scripture for the Christian life.

Compare the proposal of God to Israel. It encompasses four full chapters in Exodus. We consider the proposition of entering into a religious covenant with this list of stipulations and promises as unseemly and the request inordinate. However, God's proffer is neither inappropriate nor extreme. This is so because it is God's covenant. It is God's covenant of membership for His community.

Needless to say, the stipulations of Exodus 21, 22, and 23 are far more extensive than the outline of Christian duties stipulated in query five of the Covenant of Church Membership in the RPCNA. As I hope to show in the next section, the covenant obligations of the church in the New Testament are not less but actually more extensive than those proposed by God to Israel.

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IN RESPONSE – A COVENANT OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP, PART THREE

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Now we come to Exodus 24:1-7. Moses inaugurates the covenant with the people of Israel.

Then He said to Moses, “Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu and seventy of the elders of Israel, and you shall worship at a distance. Moses alone, however, shall come near to the LORD, but they shall not come near, nor shall the people come up with him.” Then Moses came and recounted to the people all the words of the LORD and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice and said, “All the words which the LORD has spoken we will do!” Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. Then he arose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain with twelve pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel. He sent young men of the sons of Israel, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as peace offerings to the LORD. Moses took half of the blood and put *it* in basins, and the *other* half of the blood he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the book of the covenant and read *it* in the hearing of the people; and they said, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!” So Moses took the blood and sprinkled *it* on the people, and said, “Behold the blood of the covenant, which the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words” (Exodus 24:1-8).

Moses came down the mountain. He spoke to Israel “and recounted to the people all the words of the LORD and all the ordinances.” The people responded, “All the words which the LORD has spoken we will do!” (Exodus 24:3).

Exodus 24:4 tells us, “Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD.” Calvin says, “This parenthesis is opportunely inserted; for we shall see a little further on that the book was read before the people....”¹ The book is the book of the

covenant. Verse 7, Moses “took the book of the covenant and read *it* in the hearing of the people.”

Before this, Moses “built an altar at the foot of the mountain with twelve pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel. He sent young men of the sons of Israel, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as peace offerings to the LORD” (Exodus 24:4-5). Then Moses took half of the blood and he sprinkled the blood of the sacrifice on the altar. The sacrifice was a link with God. To complete the link with the people, Moses took two steps. First, Moses “took the book of the covenant and read *it* in the hearing of the people” (Exodus 24:7). This was God’s covenant of church membership set before the people of Israel. The proposal put to Israel, as already seen, was extensive.

The response of the people to the stipulations of the covenant was also significant. “All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!” (Exodus 24:7). The people swore allegiance to God and to all the words He gave to them. They subscribed to the covenant of church membership set forth by God through Moses.

Finally, Moses took the other half of the blood of the sacrifice and sprinkled it upon the people. He said, “Behold the blood of the covenant, which the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words” (Exodus 24:8). Thus the people were bound to God by covenant.

Now we continue our comparison with the church in the New Testament. We have seen the church in the New Testament is the fulfillment of the purposes of God in Israel. The church in the New Testament is therefore a covenant community just as Israel was. The blood of the covenant is the blood of Christ.

Christians are chosen “by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood” (1 Peter 1:2). This is the pattern of Exodus 24. Christians must subscribe to the terms of God’s covenant. They must obey Jesus Christ. They must also be joined to God with the blood of the sacrifice. They must be sprinkled by the blood of Christ.

What are the terms of the New covenant? We turn once again to the Great Commission. “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20).

Church membership is essential to Christianity. Discipleship is integral to church membership. Discipleship means “teaching them to observe all that I commanded you.” The apprentice is bound to his master for the purpose of learning to do all the master can teach. The disciple therefore ought to pledge himself or herself to learn to do all Christ commands.

We may put it this way. The book of the covenant is the Bible. Our response to the Bible ought to be, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!” In other words, the Bible, from Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22:21, is God’s covenant of church membership. Christ presents us with the Bible, *the* book of the covenant. Our response? As disciples we must pledge to learn to do all that Christ commands us in Scripture.

Our biblical covenant of church membership is not brief. It is extensive and detailed. The response required is comprehensive. In it we do not pledge to follow a few miscellaneous stipulations. We must be willing to learn and do *all* Christ commands.

Note the promise of God to Israel, “Behold, I am going to send an angel before you to guard you along the way and to bring you into the place which I have prepared. Be on your guard before him and obey his voice; do not be rebellious toward him, for he will not pardon your transgression, since My name is in him (Exodus 23:20-21). Compare the promise of Christ. “And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). Surely we may expect the vital presence of Christ with us only as we are faithful to our covenant of church membership, as we consciously commit ourselves to learn to do all Christ commands. ‘In Response’ is published by the Sterling Pulpit, Post Office Box 303, Sterling, KS 67579-0303. Copyright © 1999 by Dennis Prutow.

¹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Last Four Books of Moses in the form of a Harmony*, 4 vols., (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 3:318.