

## Open Church Membership vs. Closed Church Membership, and the Bible

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Answer these questions honestly. Could Jesus, if physically here, become the pastor of your church - without becoming a member of it? Could He be an elder, deacon, teach a Sunday School class ... or even be a greeter? Don't lie. If not, then your church practices closed membership. Incidentally, Who resides in a Christian making a Christian ... a Christian in the first place? "*I in them*" (Jn 17:23) and "*Christ in you, the hope of glory*" (Col 1:27). When a Christian walks in your church ... is Jesus walking in too?

God commands, "*examine everything; adhere to the good*" (1Thes 5:21). Church membership is a "*thing*." As it affects the practical workings of the fellowship of the saints, scrutiny is demanded. Indeed, to leave this practice unexamined ... would be sin.

### Definitions

Closed church membership places one's profession of faith *secondary* to the elements composing that local church's qualifications for "*membership*." A profession of faith in Jesus Christ, as one's Lord and Savior, is not enough to be "*in*." Chosen distinctives must be agreed to - before full access is granted.

Open church membership recognizes one's profession of faith as an authoritative transaction between an individual and God. "*(J)oyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us into the Kingdom of His beloved Son*" (Col 1:12,13). God Himself lavishes all kinds of temporal and eternal gifts, promises and positions at that transfer ... and he/she is "*in*." Open membership honors this eternal transaction immediately and fully - and fears unrighteously inserting itself between the all-powerful, living, holy Creator ... and His child.

### The Catalyst For My Inquiry

When on staff at a residential ministry, a professing Christian left us and headed to a local area church. He was unrepentant of clear-cut sin. I called the church to inform them - with the expectation they would investigate, and then present a united front toward that errant brother. Such action internally protects the local body - and is actually an act of love toward the offender. This also externally protects that local body from being viewed as a haven for unrepentant, "*spiritual felons*" who are professing Christians. Anyway, I was told the church could not do anything. That individual ... was not a member of the church. Questions came ... and convictions arose.

### The Practice of Church Membership

Historically, church membership is a relatively new practice. The Reformation catapulted its use. Its purpose was to keep nonconformists to the particular sect ... *out*. Distinctives of the sect were thus protected from corruption. Actually, not much has changed. This is one of those unusual instances when "*preservation*" actually promotes decay. For you to understand the forthcoming material ... teachability is required.

### **The “Free Zone” and the “Freeze-Out Zone”**

Closed membership creates an outer “zone” in the local church. Professing Christians can attend ... and float around as free agents - with no accountability or responsibility. This is a “Free Zone” created by church leaders - unsanctioned by God. On the other hand, it’s also a “Freeze-Out Zone.” Church leaders **can keep out** professing Christians whom they designate “a threat” for some reason. This censorship is destructive to the “frozen-out” saint and also damages that local church body.

### **Damage 1: Weaker Brothers Rule**

... with stronger brothers dispatched. Closed membership is actually the bad fruit ... of weaker brothers. This tool keeps stronger brothers out - who cannot, and will not, bow before these fire-destined, plastic barriers. For example, Paul cites those who declare certain days as “high and holy,” or who declare things “unclean” that actually aren’t ... as weaker brothers (Ro 14:1-23, and 1Cor 10:19-33). Of course, they often do not **appear** weaker - or believe themselves so. They pound pulpits, institutionalize their petty distinctives, rule their flocks, attack dissenters - and keep out contrarians. Then, in the greatest of ironies, **they charge saints so dispatched** as, “unwilling to submit to authority,” “divisive,” “factionous,” “rebellious,” “loners,” “being their own God,” “unteachable,” “self-righteous,” etc. But, in truth, those hiding behind their plastic barriers **have shut themselves off** from unwanted information - and challenges. Closed church membership establishes bastions where weaker brothers rule ... for now.

### **Damage 2: A Maimed Body**

God grants spiritual gifts to His children “for the common good” (1Cor12:7). The Spirit distributes these “to each one individually just as He wills” (1Cor 12:11). I will not be surprised if we find that all through history, God gifted area saints with a great balance of the gifts. And, the health of that body, and consequent impact on their area, will be directly related to the accuracy of their church leadership practices (polity). Closed church membership is an extremely effective tool ... for cutting the local body to shreds. Local “leaders” cut off hands, feet, ears - and gouge out eyes ... and then wonder why they do not have a greater impact on their community. Closed church membership comes directly from the toolbox of “the angel of light” (2Cor 11:14). He has used, and continues using it - deftly.

### **Damage 3: “In Order That the World May Believe ...”**

“I do not ask in behalf of (the disciples) alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word, that they may all be one ... **in order that the world may believe that You did send Me**” (Jn 17:20,21).

Open Church Membership is hard. Individuals of great differences gather, and work together - in common cause. This befuddles outside observers ... because naturally, “birds of a feather flock together.” God wants to create a local body that is extremely “unnatural.” Open membership results in a group that, just by its very existence - speaks loudly and convincingly to the surrounding community. Unfortunately, closed membership creates churches that look - to outsiders - just like other groups. It is made up of the same “type” of people. This single error forfeits one of God’s greatest witnessing tools - unity in true diversity.

## The Local Church

... is God's creation for His children in this age. Saints are equipped there "*for the work of service*" (Eph 4:12). Spiritual gifts are exercised there for "*the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man*" (Eph 4:12,13). It is not a place of universal agreement on all things - as each person is at a different maturity level - in knowledge, understanding and behaviors. So, it's a place of tolerance in many areas ... yet, a place where "*iron sharpens iron*" (Pr 27:17). That necessarily involves friction. It's a place of discovery, inquiry and growth - and an oasis and place of safety. It's a place where His children experience glimpses of the coming age, "*where righteousness dwells*" (2Pet 3:13).

## Local Church Leadership's Actual Responsibility

Initial responsibility of local church leadership toward a newcomer is extremely simple. Is that individual a professing Christian - or not? If affirmative, as a member of the body of Christ, God requires local leaders *to allow His child full access to all the spiritual treasures residing in that local group*. Furthermore, He expects that local body to seek Him for His reasons in bringing that saint to them at that point in their history.

God requires behavioral and doctrinal soundness of every saint - new and old alike. Local leadership must be **extremely careful** in defining *what that last statement actually means*. When Paul said, "*If any so-called brother ... should be an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler .... Remove the wicked man from among yourselves*" (1Cor 5:11-13), those sins must be defined **the way God defines them**. And when violated, the procedure of Matthew 18:15-17 must be followed. The same is true when assessing doctrinal soundness. Who would God label, "*a factious man*" (1Ti 3:9-11)? What "*is contrary to sound teaching*" (1Ti 1:10) - as opposed to allowing convictions of those weaker in knowledge to stand (Ro 14: 1-23)? And what is an actual spreading of "*strife among the brethren*" (Pr 6:19)? Proper definitions on all counts must be carefully forged before the Head of the Church - and clearly announced to newcomers. Freedom to challenge those definitions is an ongoing right if one believes grounds have been discovered for such a challenge.

## Conclusion

God does not require anything beyond properly defined behaviors and doctrines for His children to have full participatory rights in the local church. Plastic barriers are an assault on that saint's granted designations bestowed by the Head of the Church. As these designations come through a successfully endured crucifixion, any practice subverting these blood-purchased endowments - **is sin of the highest order**. Ignorance *of* these matters will not excuse one from accountability *for* these matters. Closed membership is sanctioned recklessness. I contend this little article will survive His flames, while myriads of church rolls, and all they represented ... will go up in smoke.

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