

How Does The Church
Establish
The Requirements Of The Bible
For Church Membership?

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Conservative denominations are in agreement on at least one principle, namely: that the Bible is the only rule by which requirements for church membership are to be established. Yet among these same Bible-believing churches there is considerable difference as to their requirements for admitting members. All agree that the Bible is to be the rule and guide, but there is disagreement in the interpretation of what the Bible is telling us. That is why we have different denominations.

In considering the question of scriptural requirements for church membership there are certain factors which need to be kept in mind.

I. We will not find in the Bible a specific list of requirements for church membership, neatly catalogued, logically arranged, clearly stated, and labelled with a "Here are all the requirements for church membership."

II. To establish the Biblical requirements for church membership, we need to take into account the whole of Scripture.

A. "The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelation of the Spirit, or the traditions of men. Nevertheless we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word."

Confession of Faith, Chapter I, Paragraph VI.

B. The Westminster Assembly used "good and necessary consequences" in the formulation of all their documents. If we were to limit the teaching of Scripture to that which is "expressly set down in Scripture" we would need to revise all of the documents of the Westminster Assembly.

C. "The exercise of Reason, with respect to Revelation, is lawful and necessary. God addresses man in the Scriptures as a rational creature: the faculty of reasoning is the gift of God; and men are bound to exercise it in searching the Scriptures, in ascertaining all the ideas which the word of God conveys to man, and drawing inferences for the direction of faith and

manners from Scripture doctrines; and these inferences, as well as the express words of Revelation, are the Divine authority. God hath spoken nothing the full force of which he did not comprehend."

Reformed Presbyterian Testimony,
Chapter IV, Section 1.

D. If we were to limit the teaching of Scripture to that which is expressly stated, a number of widely accepted beliefs and practices would have to be abandoned:

(1) We observe the First Day of the week as the Christian Sabbath, though there is no specific command in the Word of God with regard to this matter.

(2) We baptize infants of the Covenant family, though the Bible contains no specific command which says, "Thou shalt baptize infants."

III. In the Jewish Talmud we find multitudes of specific rules — presumably a rule governing every conceivable situation. This is not the principle on which the Word of God is to be interpreted. It is not a collection of four thousand and forty rules for four thousand and forty situations: rather, it sets forth divinely revealed principles which are to be applied, whatever the situation. For example:

A. When our Lord gave us the Golden Rule in the 7th chapter of Matthew's Gospel, He did not go into detail as to how it was to be applied. He said, simply, "All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them."

B. The obligations laid upon us by the Ten Commandments are not limited to the exact words of the Commandments. Our Larger and Shorter Catechisms tell us the "Required" and "Forbidden" of the Ten Commandments; and our Lord, in the 5th chapter of Matthew, let us know that we were disobeying the Commandments if we were disobeying them in spirit.

IV. We must not commit the error of concluding that any course of action, or use of anything not expressly condemned in Scripture by a specific and categorical statement, is therefore "indifferent."

A. The word "indifferent" is not a Biblical term. However, when it is used to identify those things, the use or non-use of which makes no difference, it is in accord with Scripture.

(1) God, in providing for us abundantly, often gives us a choice between things which are equally good. In such a

case, it is a matter of indifference as to which one is chosen.

a. We are told in I Corinthians 8:8 that food does not commend us to God. We are not the worse if we do not eat, nor are we better if we eat. It is a matter of indifference whether I use olive oil in my salad dressing. Neither I nor my brother will be better men if we refrain from using it; nor will we be damaging ourselves if we use it.

b. Calvin in his Institutes, Book III. Chapter XIX, Par. 9, acknowledges that some things are "indifferent." He says, "They say they are things indifferent. I admit it, provided they are used indifferently."

B. When the term "indifferent" is used to mean (1) Everything not condemned in Scripture by a categorical statement, is indifferent, and (2) Christians are free to indulge regardless of consequences to themselves, to their families, to their church, and to the Christ Whom they love and serve and Whose Kingdom they have pledged to advance: such interpretation of the meaning of "indifferent" is not supported by the teachings of the Word of God.

(1) Such passages as Romans the 14th chapter, and I Corinthians the 8th and 10th chapters, have been cited to support such a use of the word "indifferent"; but it takes a prodigious leap to go from what Paul is discussing in these chapters, to the position that everything not expressly forbidden in the Bible by an express statement, is "indifferent."

The Word of God indicates that its list of sins is not complete. Galatians 5:19-21 enumerates certain sins, and adds "and such like." I Timothy 1:10 names over a number of sins, and adds "if there be any other thing contrary to sound doctrine."

Our Lord Jesus Christ gave the promise of the Holy Spirit Whom He would send into the world. The Holy Spirit would reveal to us the things of Christ. "And He, when He is come, will convict the world in respect of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment." —John 16:8.

Using the principles which our Lord

laid down in the Bible, the Holy Spirit will show us the right and wrong use of what we find in the world at any given time.

V. It is proper for the church to make rules concerning the use of things which are not in themselves inherently harmful. When the church does so, it is following the precedent set by the Council of Jerusalem.

A. Meat which had been offered to an idol was still good meat whose quality had not been altered.

(1) Knowing this, the Council of Jerusalem — with elders and apostles present, and guided by the Holy Spirit, sent word to the church in Antioch and other places, stating the Council's requirements for the churches: "It seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: That ye abstain from meats offered to idols . . ." (Acts 15:28,29).

Dr. G. Campbell Morgan, in *The Acts of the Apostles*, commenting on this action by the Council of Jerusalem, points out "the necessity for the bondage to the law of the Spirit of life. There must be, on the part of all Christian souls, . . . abstention from many practices, not in themselves unlawful, in order to a testimony of separation . . . and devotion to the Divine ideal of human life, and to the keeping of laws for the well being of human life."

B. For-as-much as the 15th chapter of Acts is a part of Scripture "inspired by God," it is to be used as any other portion of Scripture "for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness."

C. It is inconsistent to follow the example of the Council of Jerusalem in making the decision of church councils binding on the members of all the congregations, and reject their example in the kind of regulations a church council may enact.

VI. Our Lord has set a high standard for His disciples. It is for us to maintain a high standard as we seek to carry out His command to "disciple the nations."

A. In Matthew 5:48, Christians are enjoined to be "perfect."

B. We are not to put a stumbling block in another's way. "Let us not therefore judge one another any more; but judge this rather, that no man put a stumbling block or an occasion to fall in his brother's way." —Romans 14:13.

"But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ." — Corinthians 8:12.

C. Our Lord used some of His strongest denunciations to condemn those who caused others to stumble. His teaching even went further than this. In His parable of the Judgment, those on the left hand were condemned because they had not fed the hungry, nor clothed the naked, nor visited those who were sick and in prison.

VII. Christians have freedom in Christ. They are free to use it when its use will edify and will be expedient. They are also free to abstain from using that freedom when its use will neither edify nor be expedient. It has been well said that "Freedom is not the right to do what we want, but the power to do what we ought."

The church is not binding the conscience of its members when it requires that its members conform to certain rules which the Church, after study and deliberation, has concluded to be in accord with the general teaching of Scripture, and applicable to the times in which we live.

To deny this, is to advocate anarchy in the Church of Christ, and a condition in which "every man does that which is right in his own eyes."