

ROMANS 16:1, 2 THE CHURCH LETTER

“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well.”¹

On one occasion during a pastorate in Coquitlam, I was subjected to a furious verbal assault during a Sunday morning service. A man gifted in many ways, was incensed at my cautious nature; I had failed to promote him to a position of oversight as quickly as he thought he deserved. Thus, he arose at the beginning of the message and delivered a tirade against me personally and against the church generally. He concluded his diatribe with the declaration that he and his family were leaving the church. He concluded with the assertion that they would never again darken the door.

This public outburst was the first I had heard of his discontent, so I was taken aback. That same afternoon, as soon as practical, I visited him, seeking to repair the breach in our fellowship. Together with another member of the congregation, I went to the man, only to be met with a series of angry, self-centred demands. I could not accede to his insistence that the congregation capitulate to his infantile stipulations; thus, the rupture in fellowship was final. Within a week, I was informed that he and his family were attending a sister congregation nearby. After several weeks, I was told that he had become a youth sponsor for that congregation; and in time, I lost track of the family.

Almost a year later, I happened to meet the pastor of that congregation to which the family had attached themselves in their fury. The pastor introduced himself, and we exchanged pleasantries. Then, naming the man that had thunderously left our own congregation that Sunday morning in question, he complained, “A family you sent us caused us a lot of grief.” That pastor continued by saying that the man had inflicted great harm on the congregation because of unchristian attitudes and constant anger.

I stopped my fellow elder at that point, explaining that we had not “sent” that family to him. I pointed out the inconvenient truth that he had not demonstrated what should be a common courtesy among the churches of our Lord—the courtesy of contacting us when that man first began attending his services. Had he inquired if there was a problem before the man offered to become a youth sponsor, or had he even phoned to see if we had concerns about the family, I would have cautioned him. I terminated our conversation by stating, “If you fish in my pond, keep what you catch.”

The failure of contemporary churches to exchange letters of dismissal and/or commendation with sister congregations betrays gross ignorance of the practise of New Testament churches. The failure either to communicate concerns about errant members or to solicit information on those seeking to participate in life of an assembly, betrays an appalling arrogance. It is as though the churches that refuse to exchange communications are saying that they do not trust the judgement of fellow Christians. It is a form of spiritual arrogance to refuse to seek input from fellow believers concerning members.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible, English Standard Version**, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

COMMENDING PHOEBE — “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church in Cenchreae.” The churches of the New Testament did indeed have membership, and they did commend their members to sister congregations when they moved about the Empire. It is a tragic observation that the practise of church membership must be defended in this day. This sad necessity has come about either through deliberate ignorance on the part of shepherds who are more concerned with pleasing the flock than with pleasing the Master and who are more thoroughly imbued with *laissez faire* idealism than with knowledge of the Word, or through intentional negligence on the part of those same shepherds because they fear a negative response from those occupying the pews.

Church members appear more eager to assert their “rights” than to accept biblical responsibilities. Perhaps this is inescapable since churches tend to reflect society instead of being agents of change within society. Exaltation of the “self” dominates the current church scene. Ecclesiastical democracy and the inevitability of congregational politics has supplanted obedience to the Word of God. The unfortunate result is that membership in the local church is equated to membership in a fraternal organisation or membership in a civic club. We attend; we join; we quit—all without accountability.

Undoubtedly, the Bible calls each individual to faith in Christ the Risen Lord. You cannot say you are a Christian if you do not believe that Jesus died because of your sin and that He rose from the dead for your justification. This is the call of God throughout the New Testament. Each week, I quote from Paul’s Letter to the Romans at the conclusion of the message. “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved” [ROMANS 10:9, 10]. Salvation assumes that the one saved will openly confess the Faith through public confession as opportunity is afforded. New Testament churches provide the opportunity to confess through baptism for those who are believers.

Those who believe are called to identify openly with the Lord Jesus through baptism. At Pentecost, when the Spirit of God had descended in power on the disciples, Peter and the other disciples proclaimed Christ, calling all who heard to repentance and faith. “Those who received [Peter’s] word were baptised” [ACTS 2:41]. In Samaria, as Philip preached the message of life, *only those who believed were baptised* [ACTS 8:12].

I am sadly amused that there are not a few preachers today who dare contend that membership is foreign to the New Testament. Such men have not thought through the consequences of their position. According to Jesus, membership is recorded in heaven! He encouraged disciples to “rejoice that your names are written in heaven” [LUKE 10:20]. Since the Lord Jesus says that the names of those who are saved are written in heaven, wouldn’t you imagine that those identified as belonging to Him should be willing to have their names recorded together with those openly confessing Him on earth?

The early church certainly maintained rolls listing those who were members. As believers moved from serving in one congregation to accept responsibility in another, letters of commendation were provided. The Apostle commends Timothy to the Corinthians [1 CORINTHIANS 16:10]. In a later letter to that same congregation he commends Titus [2 CORINTHIANS 8:23]. Mark is commended to the Colossian church [COLOSSIANS 4:10]. If membership does not matter—if who one is or where one belongs is unimportant, such letters would have served no purpose.

So, Paul commends Phoebe to the Church in Rome. She was a servant in the church in Cenchreae. Cenchreae, situated about eight miles from Corinth, served as the seaport for that great city. Though we cannot say that Paul established the church in Cenchreae, he knew the church, having spent time in that city. Paul is said to have set sail for Jerusalem from that seaport following his third missionary journey [ACTS 18:18].

The picture that emerges through even a casual review of these verses is that this dedicated servant of the church was travelling to Rome. The reason for her journey is not stated, nor is it necessarily germane to the study before us in this hour. In Rome, Phoebe would be unknown to the Christians. She would have no ministry such as she had exercised in her home congregation until she was accepted by the Roman saints. Frequently, we forget the danger of being a Christian in that ancient world. The believers were harried and hounded simply because they professed faith in the Son of God!

The Jerusalem disciples had good reason to be wary of Saul after he professed faith in the Son of God. You will recall that “when [Saul] had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple” [ACTS 9:26]. They had already experienced persecution and had even witnessed executions because of the Faith of Christ the Lord. Recall the events following the execution of Stephen. “Saul approved of [Stephen’s] execution.

“...[T]here arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles... Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison” [ACTS 8:1-3]. Becoming a Christian was risky business. It was vital that the churches communicate with one another.

Therefore, the letter from the Church in Cenchreae to the Church in Rome assumed exaggerated importance if Phoebe was to fulfil the ministry God had given her. Similarly, in this day, in order to fulfil the ministry God has assigned, the commendation of one congregation to another assumes an important—if neglected—role in development of Christian service as members move from church to church.

WHY COMMEND PHOEBE? “I commend to you our sister Phoebe ... so that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and provide her with whatever help she may need from you.” Phoebe likely carried the letter to the Roman church. The commendation contained within the letter was specifically provided to ensure that she would be welcomed by the congregation. Through such commendation, fears concerning her commitment would be allayed and opportunity to join in the ministries provided through the congregation would be assured.

The unspoken truth is that the Church in Cenchreae knew who Phoebe was; she was a member of that congregation. Perhaps you imagine that the apostolic churches were small, and hence they would know everyone who worshipped with the saints. However, even a casual reading of the first several chapters of Acts demonstrates that the Church in Jerusalem was massive. Some estimates place the membership of that congregation at 20,000 or more. Clearly, the congregation had membership rolls since they knew which widows could receive the daily distributions from the church [ACTS 6:1]. We know that Chrysostom pastored the church in Antioch shortly after Acts was written; and the membership of that congregation is reported to have exceeded 100,000!²

² W. A. Criswell, **Acts: An Exposition, Volume II, Chapters 9-18** (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 1979) 101

Even was there no evidence of church membership in the New Testament, that would not mean that church rolls should not be maintained. If, as even those who ignore the practise of church membership concede, God grants freedom in this area, we should respect the decision of the local congregation, exercising a submissive spirit to those with whom we worship. We should each determine to show a spirit of sweet reasonableness, instead of demanding that the church make concession to our preferences.

Pastors must know who the members are in order to give them priority in ministry. Pastors are referred to in Scripture as “overseers” and as “elders.” Oversight of the flock is entrusted to the overseers, but overseers have no authority over those who are not part of the household God has entrusted to the overseers’ care. Errant Christians identified with another communion may be cautioned, but little can be done concerning their error if they are not under the authority of the overseers.

Likewise, an elder is recognised within the congregation that knows him and recognises his qualifications; but an elder of a congregation has no particular stature, other than that of a godly man, outside the congregation to which he belongs. Similarly, a pastor can shepherd only the flock over which God has appointed him.

Without a stated membership, there is no possibility of discipline for the flock. Discipline is neglected in the contemporary church world; and one major reason for this neglect is an absence of teaching concerning membership and mutual accountability. When a member of another church is errant, other than a public warning to one’s own congregation cautioning against contamination resulting from the individual’s error, there can be no discipline administered. Thus, there is no possibility of loving correction for the errant person. Though the elders of the church may protect the flock from the errant individual, they cannot bring the individual back into the path of righteousness because there is no authority to them to correct those who are not under their authority.

Membership rolls encourage other believers because they know they are not alone. We rightly expect that our fellow members who have entered into covenant with us to invest their gifts in our lives so that the Body may be strengthened. Likewise, we anticipate that we will have opportunity to strengthen our fellow members through exercise of the gifts God has entrusted to us.

Perhaps the reason we fail to esteem membership has more to do with refusal to accept the responsibilities imposed by the covenant of membership. If I have no vital relationship to the Body with which I worship, I need not concern myself with the problems of those who are part of the assembly. If there is no covenant relationship, I can leave whenever I choose. However, if I have a covenant relationship with the people of God where I worship, I am compelled to accept the responsibility for reconciliation and to build each member sharing in this most Holy Faith.

Membership permits accountability in the exercise of the ministries God entrusts. Paul frequently compared a congregation to a body. In fact, he speaks of the congregation as the Body of Christ, appealing to the multiplicity of members that make up a body as an example of the diversity found within a particular congregation. As an example of this use of the concept, in the **12th chapter of ROMANS** he instructs the membership of the Roman congregation through appealing to their individual standing within the Body proper. “As in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and *individually members one of another*”[ROMANS 12:4, 5].

Having established that verbal picture, he instructs the members of the congregation concerning accountability in the exercise of their various gifts. He does the same thing when he instructs the Corinthian congregation, comparing the members of the church to the human body; however, it is obvious that Paul is identifying that particular congregation as the Body of Christ. In **1 CORINTHIANS 12:12-27**, The Apostle has written: “Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

“For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.

“The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honourable we bestow the greater honour, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honour to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together.

“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

The Apostle does not say to the Corinthian congregation that they were a “part” of the Body of Christ—“part” of a great, amorphous, undefined entity. Rather, Paul asserts that the Corinthian congregation *is* the Body of Christ, and that the individuals making up that Body were recognised and known to each other. Therefore, the gifts represented were given in order that they could be exercised within that Body to build it up.

Membership in the local congregation reflects commitment both to Christ, to the church that He loved, and to the message declared from the pulpit. Since it is true that “Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her” [**EPHESIANS 5:25**], those who love Christ should love the church that He purchased with His own blood. When Paul commanded the Ephesian elders, “Care for the church of God, which He obtained with His own blood” [**ACTS 20:28**], he was not instructing them to serve as itinerating elders; they were to fulfil the ministry to which they were appointed among the flock in Ephesus. Since the blood of Christ was shed to establish local congregations, Christians must love the church that He established—the local church that reveals the heavenly design.

There are good reasons for the transfer to and reception of members between the churches. First, **communicating as churches equal in the sight of God honours the Lord**. When we treat churches equally we tacitly acknowledge the reign of Christ as the Head over His congregations. The size of a church does not determine its qualification as a church. Greatness in the Kingdom of God is unrelated to size. Greatness is measured by commitment to Christ and to His cause. Greatness is reflected in humility and an attitude reflecting the heart of a servant.

I also observe the oft neglected fact that communication between the churches **permits commendation of those who are worthy of commendation**. Perhaps the point is self-evident, but it is good and noble to commend those worthy of commendation. While it is true that godly individuals will make themselves known soon enough, it is nevertheless a good thing to commend those members who are known to be godly and active in service to Christ, just as Paul commended Phoebe to the Church in Rome.

In a similar vein, as one church communicates with a sister congregation we are **able to caution against investing undue trust in those unworthy of such trust**. Professing Christians that are a cause for heartache and who constantly drain the energies of the assembly will likely deplete another congregation just as badly. Therefore, it is right and proper to caution others about such problem Christians.

Paul cautioned Timothy about two men who would threaten the congregation through their presence. “Avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some” [2 TIMOTHY 2:16].

The command is akin to the command concerning those who are divisive within the assembly that Paul gave to Titus. “As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned” [TITUS 3:10, 11].

Paul also cautioned the Roman saints. “One final word of counsel, friends. Keep a sharp eye out for those who take bits and pieces of the teaching that you learned and then use them to make trouble. Give these people a wide berth. They have no intention of living for our Master Christ. They’re only in this for what they can get out of it, and aren’t above using pious sweet talk to dupe unsuspecting innocents” [ROMANS 16:17, 18].³

This is not a generalised warning to be suspicious of everyone. Rather, the words are intended to caution against specific individuals who are “distortionists” of the Word. How does a congregation know how to keep a sharp eye out for someone if they do not know who they are? The King James Version commands us to “mark” such people. Paul clearly had in mind specific individuals, known to the congregation and having access to them. Such individuals need to be denoted and sister congregations warned of them.

Through communicating with a sister congregation, the sending congregation is able to **recommend areas of ministry that will strengthen fellow believers**. Communicating with fellow elders, pastors are able to strengthen transferring members by recommending areas in which they will benefit from specific pastoral and/or congregational attention. Conscientious pastors are usually aware of their congregants, and they endeavour to do what is best for the spiritual welfare of the flock over which they have received appointment. Accordingly, when members leave for another congregation, conscientious pastors will recommend ministries to strengthen the former members.

Communications can **suggest beneficial areas of ministry for former members**. Just as we should be willing to recommend areas of ministry that will be beneficial to the individuals we are sending to sister churches, so we should recommend to the receiving churches areas of ministry that the people they are receiving can ably perform.

³ Eugene H. Peterson, **The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary English** (NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO 1993)

The practise of transferring members through the exchange of church letters, **permits congregations to more effectively minister to their own people.** When the congregation knows who is a member and who is not, they are able to adjust the quorum required to conduct church business without resorting to artificial means. This is related to the fact that it permits the elders to know those over whom they have oversight.

THE ANTICIPATION ARISING FROM COMMENDATION — “I commend to you our sister Phoebe ... for she has been a great help to many, including me.” The Roman Christians could anticipate that Phoebe would be a blessing among them, just as she had blessed many other Christians, including the Apostle. A church letter is a statement of hope and anticipation. Those coming to us with a letter from a sister congregation are in effect saying, “I have served God elsewhere, and I look forward to serving Him here among you. Just as my gifts have blessed others, so you may anticipate that they will bless you.”

The church letter is a statement of commitment. Does commitment matter? Ask the woman living with a man when that man does not want to be married. I still recall with deep sadness the bitter tears of a neighbour. Lynda provided after school care for the woman’s son. The woman was living with a man who had no desire to be married. On one particular day when she came to pick up her son, she asked him to go outside and play. Knowing that I was a pastor, she wanted to talk to Lynda and me.

She wept bitter tears as she told us a sorrowful tale. She was pregnant, and the man she had been living with was no longer interested in having her as a girlfriend. He pushed her to have an abortion; but because of her Catholic background, abortion was out of the question for her. He had no desire to be a parent; and so, he was kicking her out. I still recall her bitter tears, and the despairing question she repeatedly raised as she talked. “What else could I have expected? He had no commitment to me.”

Most of us nod knowingly at a tale such as this. Living together without formal commitment to one another predisposes an individual to an uncertain and unstable life at best. We intuitively recognise the benefit to a couple—and to their family—of a formal, public declaration of commitment to one another. In fact, it is so commonly accepted that people will seek marriage, that it requires a major social upheaval to change social expectations. Until very recently, no one would have defended living together in lieu of marriage. Though the practise was known, it was not generally acceptable within society.

If refusal to be married before enjoying conjugal relations predisposes a couple to marital instability, should it be surprising that refusal to commit to the Community of Faith likewise predisposes a Christian to instability? It is simply too easy to walk away when the going gets tough if there is no formal declaration of commitment to doctrinal principles, just as it is far too easy to walk away from relationships when people are discovered to be ... well, people. One thing is certain in all our relationships, even within the church, and that is that we will have times of conflict.

Without a formal commitment, can one truly be submitted to the leadership that God has appointed? Are pastors appointed with a mandate to exercise oversight for the whole of Christendom? Do they not rather have responsibility within the congregation wherein God has placed them? Because God appoints elders to specific congregations, God commands Christians to foster an attitude of submission toward those appointed over them. “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls as those who will have to give an account” [HEBREWS 13:17].

Undoubtedly, the anticipated attitude of submission is restricted to those who are accountable for your soul. Similarly, only those that voluntarily accept the oversight of the elders are held accountable by those whom God has appointed to that office. This teaching presupposes a relationship within the local congregation that is built upon commitment. It anticipates a relationship that is permanent rather than a tenuous relationship of casual participation and receiving only what is personally acceptable.

The Bible anticipates that those who believe will exhibit commitment to Christ. Why else does the Bible call on all who believe to submit openly to His reign? We are taught, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” The Apostle then cites Joel in order to make clear the necessity of Christ’s reign in the life of one who believes, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13]. Commitment to Christ is anticipated of those who believe.

The Apostle again cites an Old Testament Prophet, reminding Christians that “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame” [ROMANS 10:11]. The confession that is expected of all who believe is identification with Christ through baptism. As those who received Peter’s message at Pentecost were immediately baptised [ACTS 2:41], so to this day, those who believe the message of Christ are called to immediately and openly demonstrate their identification with and commitment to the Master through baptism.

Commitment to Christ in the context of the apostolic church was displayed through commitment to the church. The demonstration of this truth is seen in the response of those baptised as result of Peter’s preaching at Pentecost. Those baptised were added to the New Beginnings Baptist Church of Jerusalem! The actions of those who were added are significant for this study.

“They were devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Reverential awe came over everyone, and many wonders and miraculous signs came about by the apostles” [ACTS 2:42].⁴ The new Christians coming into the Faith and into the congregation “committed themselves”⁵—their commitment was to **doctrine, fellowship, worship** and **prayer**. In short, they committed themselves to the church of the Apostles. When the text states that the new converts committed themselves to fellowship, the word “fellowship” refers here to close association involving mutual involvement and relationships.

We have no way either to assess or to estimate individual commitment to Christ outside of commitment to His church. One who loves Christ undoubtedly loves His church. We must not be like Linus, who lamented, “I love humanity. It’s people I can’t stand.” Of course, Charles Schultz was paraphrasing Edna St. Vincent Millay, who said, “I love humanity, but I hate people.” The sentiment is shared by far too many people today. In the Faith of Christ the Lord, if we truly love Christ we will love His people.

Churches are increasingly anthropocentric—man centred—and they are more concerned about the feelings of worshippers than they are concerned for the glory of the Saviour. Because parishioners are more concerned with how their friends feel than they are with how God sees them, they exert incredible pressure on pastors to conform to the culturally determined expectations of untaught and disobedient people.

⁴ NET Bible (Biblical Studies Press, L.L.C., Plano, TX 1996-2006)

⁵ Peterson, op. cit.

However, once a pastor compromises the truth for the sake of the feelings of a particular individual (or for a group within the congregation), he has not only done a disservice to the people, but has compromised his office and duty as pastor and his leadership within the flock. He has failed in his love not only to the individuals involved, but also to those that may follow after, by not standing in the breach to provide ample warning. He has failed as a pastor and as a teacher; he has failed his calling; he has failed as an example to stand for what he knows to be the truth.

The decision then becomes to pick between the lesser of two evils. When church membership is required and expected of a Christian, it should be done in a manner worthy of membership. When a church blatantly fails in its responsibilities to preach the truth without compromise, I submit that it cannot expect blind compliance to the rules it generates. In fact the church that fails in its mission to preach, teach, baptise and demand submission to appointed leadership, is no longer a church, but a mere religious organisation; and Christ's true churches are obligated to warn their members against dealing with all such entities.

Are you obedient to the Word of God? Do you honour the church for which Jesus died? It is my ardent prayer that each one listening to this message will commit himself or herself to the church of the Lord Jesus wherever the Spirit of God has placed you.

Whenever I would preach among the black churches in Dallas County so many years ago, at the conclusion of the message the Pastor would announce that the doors of the church were then opened to all who would come into the fellowship. He would invite those in attendance to come and unite through the confession of Christ as Lord, through submission to His call to believer's baptism, or through the transfer of their letter from a church of like faith and practise. That is our invitation to you who now hear this message. The doors of this church are now open. If you will, come now, while there is time. Come, and do so to the glory of God. Amen.