

Articles by T. B. Gilbert

T. B. Gilbert

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Church Membership and Church Fellowship - Is There a Difference?

There is much said today about church membership or joining the church. Some are inquiring, "What does the Bible teach on this subject?" We would like to point out the difference between church membership and church fellowship.

In the New Testament church membership is associated with the Body of Christ and church fellowship with the local church.

There Is One Body

When a person becomes a Christian, through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, he is immediately made a member of the Body of Christ, or The Church. "For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit" (I Cor. 12:13). "We are members of His body" (Eph. 5:30). All Christians, as believers, have been "called unto the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (I Cor. 1:9). The Epistle to the Ephesians deals with the church as the body of Christ, while the first Corinthian epistle speaks of the local church as "body of Christ." (See Eph. 4:4 and I Cor. 12:27). They are closely related.

The Local Church gathers as the body of Christ and is representative of it. They receive one another as Christ also received them to the glory of God the Father (Rom. 15:7). Therefore, only those who are members of Christ's Body can be scripturally received by the local church.

On the Day of Pentecost, as recorded in Acts chapter two, the Holy Spirit descended and baptized all believers into the Body of Christ. Immediately a local church was formed in Jerusalem, as the believers “continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:41-42). The Holy Spirit had made them all ONE in Christ, and this oneness was expressed by their gathering together in the local church. This was the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, into which they had been called. (I Cor. 1:9).

Can We Have Divine Order Today?

How often the question is raised, “Th this divine order, established at the beginning of the church, possible today?” The answer is YES! Wherever believers discard all denominational and group names, and meet in the name of the Lord Jesus alone (Matt. 18:20), seeking to be guided by the Scriptures, and willing to receive the members of Christ’s Body who are not disqualified from fellowship because of sin (I Cor. 5: 1-5) or unsound doctrine (Rom. 14: 1; Titus 3:9-10; II John 10), they ARE a New Testament church!

The Teaching of God’s Word

The Word of God teaches that all Christians are members of Christ’s body. (Eph. 5:30). A local church is two or more of these members gathering together in the name of the Lord Jesus. (Matt. 18:20). Such a company can act as The Church, even without being organized, because it is the Church.

The Promise of the Lord Jesus

The Lord Jesus Christ has promised His presence where two or three are gathered together in His Name. (Matt. 18:20). No sect or particular group has exclusive rights to the name of Christ-that peerless Name belongs to all Christians. Therefore, it is sound advice to direct Christians, young and old, to the fellowship of saints who meet together seeking to carry out the teaching of the Scriptures. The local church is a place of fellowship for those who have been "called unto the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (I Cor. 1:9)

The Historical Record

As one reads the Book of Acts one observes that wherever Paul preached the gospel he left a church. We never read of him organizing a church because the church is not an organization. It is an organism-a body. Paul did, however, gather believers around the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit raised up elders in each place to feed the church. (Acts 20:28, 32; I Cor. 12:28-31).

The nearest thing we have in the New Testament to "joining a church" is Paul's experience recorded in Acts 9:26, "He assayed to join himself to the disciples: but they were afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple." As a Christian he naturally desired to be associated with other Christians and thus sought fellowship in the local church at Jerusalem. The Sovereignty of the Local Church Each local church is a sovereignty with Christ in the midst, as seen in Revelation, chapters 2 and 3, but each should recognize and seek the fellowship of other churches inasmuch as they are one in Christ. We read of the whole church,

“There is one body” (Eph. 4:4), and of the local church, “Ye are body of Christ” (I Cor. 12:27, R. V.).

In conclusion we would say that all true Christians are members of the church which is Christ’s body by the baptism of the Holy Spirit (I Cor. 12: 13). They should also be in fellowship in a local church which represents that body (Acts 2:41; I Cor. 1:9). It is in the local church where Christians meet together for worship and to bear collective testimony for the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 2:42, 47; Hebrews 10: 25; 13: 13-16). The Lord has commanded, “Gather my saints together unto me; those that have made a covenant with me by sacrifice” (Psa. 50: 5). “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together” (Heb. 10:25). May He find us ever faithful to His word!

T.B. Gilbert

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Our Advocate and Forgiveness

It is a blessed thing for one to know Christ as his Savior but more blessed to know the Savior. Paul could say, "I know whom I have believed" (2 Tim. 1:12), but also desired to "know Him and the power of His resurrection" (Phil. 3:10).

The Lord Jesus Christ not only became man to die for our sins but is now a risen, glorified man in heaven, the High Priest and Advocate of His people. As High Priest, He is touched with the feeling of our infirmities and lives to strengthen us, that we might "hold fast our confession" - or testimony in this world (Heb. 4:14-16, R.V.). As Advocate (or intercessor) He pleads our cause when we sin. "If any man sin, We Have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 2:1). when a Christian does wrong he needs one who is right, or righteous, to plead his cause. We need an advocate in heaven, because Satan accuses us before God day and night (Rev. 12:10). Satan would like to put a mark against the Christian when he sins. If he could do this, every Christian would be barred from heaven, because none is perfect But, thank God, the Lord Jesus Christ is the author of Eternal Salvation. He not only died upon the cross to save us, but He lives as our Advocate in heaven to intercede on our behalf; therefore, "Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect?" (Rom. 8: 33). "If any man sin, we have an Advocate." Notice, it does not say if any man confess his sin we have an Advocate but, "If any man sin." The moment a Christian sins Christ his Advocate pleads his cause, so that no charge can be laid against him in heaven. Sin, however, does

affect his fellowship with God his Father and must be confessed on earth.

It is important to notice, “we have

An Advocate With the Father”

not with God as creator or judge but as Father. The name “Father” denotes a family and children. The sinner will have to meet God in judgment for his sins after death (Heb. 9:27). But the Christian is chastised, by his Father, in this life here and now, and more especially when he does not judge himself and confess his sins (1 Cor. 11:31). God’s character in dealing with sin is “a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:29). The Lord Jesus met God in His holiness and was consumed by His wrath for our sins, as it is written: “Thy wrath lieth hard upon Me, and Thou hast afflicted Me with all Thy waves” (Ps. 88:7). He cried upon the cross: “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46). Surely, this is proof that no sinner who meets God in his sins will ever escape His wrath. Moses saw God as a consuming fire dwelling in the “bush.” He marveled that “the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed” (Exodus 3:2). God might have consumed the bush (Israel), because He was holy and they were sinful; but in grace He condescended to dwell with them as their Deliverer and Savior. And so He does with us. God chastens (child-trains) His children as a Father now, but at the judgment seat of Christ their works of wood, hay, and stubble will be burned by the fire of His judgment. But the believer himself “shall be saved; yet so as by fire” (1 Cor. 3:15).

Some Christians at Corinth were weak and sickly, and some slept (died), because of unjudged sin The Lord judged them as children, that they “should not be con-

demned with the world" (1 Cor. 11:32). The same was doubtless true of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-10). Both of these cases were sins unto death (1 John 5:16), i.e. they died for, or because of, their sin in this life, but will not be condemned in the next life. Sinners will be judged after death (Acts 17:31, Heb. 9:27), not here.

The Forgiveness of Sins

This is one of the most important subjects in the Bible. Ignorance of the Scriptures regarding this truth will rob one of joy, happiness, and blessing. There are three aspects of forgiveness that I would like to consider namely: 1-God's Forgiveness of Sinners; 2-The Father's Forgiveness of His children; 3.-The Christian's Forgiveness of others.

1-God's Forgiveness of Sinners.

It is a known fact that sin cannot enter heaven. Since all in the world are sinners, each one must be forgiven or be lost forever (Rom. 3:23). This forgiveness must be upon the ground of God's sovereign grace and not man's worthiness. "Grace and truth came by Jesus Christ" (John 1:17).

The ground of forgiveness is Christ's death and resurrection: "Him hath God exalted with His right hand to be a Prince and a Savior, for to give repentance to Israel, and the forgiveness of sins" (Acts 5:31). "Through this Man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins" (Acts 13:38). "Whosoever believeth in Him shall receive remission (forgiveness) of sins" (Acts 10:43).

The foundation of the new covenant is the blood of Christ (Maft. 26:28, Heb. 10:16); therefore, all believers can say: "In whom we have redemption through His

blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace" (Eph. 1:7). Notice these words, "we have redemption,"

"we have.... the forgiveness of sins"; and note the ground: "according to the riches of His grace." What a wonderful salvation God's grace has provided for the sinner! He has said concerning all who believe, "Their sins and iniquities will I remember no more" (Heb. 10:17).

Reader, are you a believer? If you are, look afresh to the cross and believe those words: "It is finished!" Believe God when He says, your sins are "remembered no more"-your past sins; your present sins; your future sins. All your sins are gone forever and you are eternally forgiven: "For by one offering He hath perfected forever them that are sanctified" (Heb. 10:14). Behold Christ Jesus who "sat down in perpetuity" at God's right hand in heaven (Heb. 10:12, R.V.) Since you are accepted in Him (Eph. 1:6), you are no longer in Adam but in Christ (1 Cor. 15:22; 2 Cor. 5:17). You are no longer a sinner but a saint (Rom. 1:7; 2 Cor. 1:2). You are in the world but not of it (John 17:16). "Ye are not your own, for ye are bought with a price" (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

Your link with the old creation has been severed forever before God, because Christ died as your substitute and you have died with Him. As a new creature you are a partaker of the "divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4); God is your Father; you are ~His child, and heaven is your home. You have received resurrection life from Christ and He is your life (Col. 3:4). You can say with Paul, "I have been crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life that I now live in the

flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me" (Gal.2:20, R.V.).

As believers we are "to walk, even as He walked" (1 John 2:6). "Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children; and walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given Himself for us" (Eph.5:1,2).

2-The Father's Forgiveness of His Children.

John wrote to the little children, "Because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake" (1 John 2:12). He also said:"These things write I unto you, that ye sin not" (1 John 2: 1). God has not saved us to go on in sin, but to live for Him (Rom. 6: 13). Paul wrote: "Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead (have died, R. V.) to sin, live any longer there-in?" (Rom. 6: 1, 2). Sin is still in us, but no longer as the ruling power of our lives; no longer to reign or to have dominion over us (Rom. 6: 12, 14). We are not saved to be "always sinning," as some say, but we read, "If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous" (1 John 2:1). We have noticed the words "Advocate with the Father." The name "Father" speaks of relationship. Because of this changed relationship, a Christian is no longer counted a sinner-not even when he sins. He is a child of God, but a disobedient child, and as such, must confess his sins to his Father, to be forgiven.

This is what happens when Christians sin:

In heaven, God our Father is displeased; Satan accuses us before God's throne; and Christ, our Advocate, must plead our cause so that no charge can be laid against us there. On earth, fellowship with our Father is broken; the Holy Spirit-the Comforter who takes of the things of

Christ and reveals them unto us-is grieved, and He must convict us of sin until we judge ourselves for allowing it and confess it to our Father. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all Un-righteousness" (1 John 1:9). He is faithful to Christ and His Word. He is just, because the debt of sin has been paid on the cross (Rom. 3:25,26); therefore, when the Christian confesses his sin, fellowship with his Father is restored. If we do not judge ourselves and confess our sins, we are subject to Our Father's chastening.

"For whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth" (Heb. 12:6). Thus we learn that a true Christian is not allowed to do as he pleases, for he is saved to please God. The sooner we learn this the better, for sin committed by the believer brings chastisement on earth and the loss of reward in heaven; while obedience~ gives joy and happiness here and will bring reward in heaven.

Peter exhorts, "giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness... For so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ... But he that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins (2 Peter 1:5-11).

Therefore, it behooves us to confess our sins immediately, lest we receive chastisement now, and lose our reward at Christ's coming (Rev. 22:12). On the other hand, should God see fit to cut off by death (sleep, 1 Cor.

11: 30) a backsudden or disobedient Christian because of his sin-although he has lost joy and fellowship and will lose future reward – yet he will enter heaven without charge against him as a child, because he is trusting a faithful Savior and Advocate. To understand this more fully one must see the difference between the “Father’s House” and the “Kingdom.” In the “Father’s House,” all the children will have fulness of joy, according to their capacity, but they will only have capacity according to their spiritual growth in this world; while in the “Kingdom,” those who are “faithful servants” will be made rulers over cities (John 14:2; Luke 19:17).

3-The Christian’s Forgiveness of Others

As children of God and members of His family, Christians are expected to obey the rules that govern God’s family. One of the rules He has established is: “Forgive, and ye shall be forgiven” (Luke 6:37). There is conditional forgiveness in God’s government: “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors” (Matt. 6:12). The Lord Jesus said: “If ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt. 6:15). In Matthew eighteen, He told a story of the man who owed ten thousand talents (millions of dollars) and was forgiven, then refused to forgive his fellow servant who owed him one hundred pence (about fifteen dollars). This man with the “unforgiving spirit” was delivered to the tormentors, and the Lord adds: “So likewise shall My heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses” (Matt 18:35). In the same chapter, Peter was told that he must forgive, not only seven times, but seventy times seven (Matt. 18:22).

If we are able to forgive a person 490 times there will be no limit to our forgiveness.

The Lord Jesus illustrated, when on the cross, what He had taught during His life. At the time of His greatest suffering at the hands of men, He cried: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). To be like Him we must forgive sinners.

In the epistles, Christians are exhorted to forgive: "Even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you" (Ephesians 4:32). If we want to walk as Christ walked, and if we want to consciously enjoy our Father's forgiveness and fellowship, we must forgive others. For it is written: "If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and His love is perfected in us... If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen" (1 John 4:12, 20)? These words may well exercise all who retain hate and unforgiveness in their hearts toward others.

Forgiveness and the Lord's Supper

The Lord Jesus Christ said: "Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift" (Matt. 5:23, 24).

In the epistles, we are taught, "Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: and be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you" (Eph. 4:31, 32).

It is not always the easiest to forgive, but it is Christlike. God prizes our gifts if we offer them having forgiveness in our hearts toward others. He commanded Israel: "Ye shall burn no leaven in any offering of the Lord made by fire" (Lev. 2:11). "Unleavened" speaks of "sincerity and truth," and "leaven" of "malice and wickedness" (1 Cor. 5:8). There was no malice or wickedness in Christ. We must lay aside these in order to praise and worship Him.

Forgiveness and Prayer

"When ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any: that your Father also....may forgive you... But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses" (Mark 11: 25-26). It is evident from this passage that our Father often withholds answers to prayer because of an unforgiving spirit. The Psalmist said: "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me" (Ps. 66: 18).

Cases have been known where prayers were answered after Christians learned and confessed before God the dreadfulness of the unforgiving spirit. No matter what it costs, we must forgive others in order to walk with God. By "suffering as Christians," we glorify God; and though our faith be tried as by fire, it will "be found unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:7; 4:16-19).

Summary

We have seen that God forgives sinners, unconditionally and eternally, through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ: "whosoever believeth in Him shall receive remission of sins" (Acts 10:43). But we have noticed that the forgiveness of children, by God our Father, is conditional upon our having a forgiving spirit toward others, and

upon our judging and our confessing sin. The disobedient child is also subject to his Father's chastening, which may mean sickness, death, or other chastisements. This chastising is here and now, not after death. The disobedient child of God suffers the loss of joy, fellowship, and worship in this life, and besides will lose reward at Christ's coming.

If he confesses his sins, having a forgiving spirit toward others, his Father will forgive him.

May the Lord give writer and reader, if saved, grace to walk worthy of our blessed Lord, with a right spirit toward others, and with true love toward God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

T.B. Gilbert

Three Important Declarations

Perhaps the greatest declaration of the past two centuries, from our point of view, was the Declaration of Independence, when our country freed itself from those who were taxing us without representation. Then, our colored people can look back to the proclamation of 1863 which set them free from slavery. However great these declarations were, they cannot be compared with those found in the Bible.

We are asking our readers to consider three declarations that have to do with our salvation and our going to heaven, as follows:

1. God has declared we are all sinners and need salvation.
2. God has declared our sin is so great that He only can save us.
3. God has declared there is only one reason why He can save us.

GOD'S FIRST DECLARATION

Man needs salvation because he is a sinner. God has declared, "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). He says, "There is not a just man upon the earth that doeth good and sinneth not" (Eccl. 7:20). His word declares, "We are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags" (Isa. 64:6). For "They that are in the flesh cannot please God" (Romans 8:8). How few of us realize how sinful we are in the eyes of a holy God. The ten commandments show what a high standard God has set for what is right and what is

wrong. In them He demands that we love God with all our hearts, soul, mind and our neighbor as ourselves (Matt 22:36-40). The Bible says, "Whosoever shall keep the whole law, yet offend in one point, is guilty of all" (James 2:10). No one except Christ, ever fulfilled the requirements of the law. A little boy was once asked by his school teacher, Johnnie, if there were forty sheep in the field and one went through the fence, how many would be left? Johnnie answered, "None". "Why Johnnie!" said the teacher, "Don't you know if there were forty sheep in the field and one went through the fence that would leave thirty-nine". Johnnie replied, "Teacher, you may know more about arithmetic than I do but you don't know anything about sheep, for if one went through the fence, the others would all follow it." This illustrates what we read in Romans 5:12. "As by one man (Adam) sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for all have sinned." Thus, it is true, "All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned everyone to his own way" (Isa. 53:6). That's why we all need salvation.

GOD'S SECOND DECLARATION

God declares because our sin is so great, He only can save us. He says "look unto me, and be ye saved, all ye ends of the earth: for I am God, and besides me there is no Savior" (Isa. 45:22). Jonah learned, "Salvation is of the Lord" (Jonah 2:9). This is something we all must learn. Peter says we are saved. "Through God our Savior" (II Peter 1:1).

GOD'S THIRD DECLARATION

In God's sight this world is lost, but in love He gave His only begotten Son, so that we might not perish (Luke

19:10; John 3:16). He sent Christ, “that the world through Him might be saved” (John 3:17). He has declared there is salvation in no other (Acts 4:12). The gospel is good news for men that are lost and cannot save themselves. It tells us Christ died for our sins, rose again, and is exalted with the right hand of God to be a Prince and a Savior (I Cor. 15: 4-6; Acts 5:31). “He is able to save unto the uttermost all that come unto God by Him” (Heb. 7:25). There is no other salvation only through Christ. If we give credit to any other name, person or thing we dishonor Him. When the jailor asked, “What must I do to be saved,” the answer came, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved” (Acts 16:31).

Notice please two important things in this verse. First, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ”, i.e. believe that God sent Him to die for our sins, be buried and to rise again. Second, then take God at His word when He says, “thou shalt be saved.”

Some say they believe but they do not know they are saved. They are without excuse. God cannot lie, and He says Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved. Reader if not saved, won't you believe God today and be saved.

Believe these three declarations found in the Bible, and say, I am a sinner and only God can save me. He says he saves those who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. I will believe on Him right now. I will receive Him into my heart. I will believe God when He says, I am saved. To those who do not believe, we ask; Why is it so easy to believe the declarations of men, but so hard to believe God's declarations. —T. B. Gilbert