

On Church Membership

The paramount concern of an institutional church in the matter of membership must always be that anyone who becomes its member does so for the right reason and that the same is true of anyone who, having been invited into its membership, declines the invitation. The corollary, of course, is that it is always far, far better for someone not to join the church for the right reason than for anyone to join it for the wrong ones.

Because the only right reason to join a church is that one understands oneself to be a Christian and therefore wants to claim the privileges and to bear the responsibilities of church membership, the basic principle underlying the concept of “truth in advertising” obliges a church to make clear exactly what these privileges and responsibilities are before inviting anyone to join it or before acquiescing in anyone’s decision not to join. Only too often, one suspects, a person chooses either to become a member or not to become one with only a more or less inadequate understanding of both the privileges and the responsibilities of such membership. In this connection, one can hardly avoid asking whether, if a nation sees fit to withhold the privileges and responsibilities of full citizenship until a person reaches eighteen or twenty-one years of age, a church can responsibly do otherwise in admitting persons to full membership in it.

Finally, in keeping with the rule that we should always be careful to be more critical of ourselves than of others, a church enjoying positive membership growth should be particularly concerned lest it be acquiring its new members for the wrong reasons, while a church suffering either zero or negative membership growth needs to ask whether it is only for the right reason that it is losing members or not acquiring new ones.

11 February 1987; rev. 25 August 2003