

Children or Constituents?

“As many as received Him, to them He gave the authority to become the children of God, even to them that believe on His name” (John 1:12).

Are we members of God’s family, or merely part of His constituency? Is Christianity something to join—like a service club or political party? Are we Christians, as a religious affiliation, or are we an essential part of God as in a family relationship? Perhaps the name is misleading. To be members of a religious group would be in the minds of most, roughly equivalent to being a Moslem or Buddhist or Hindu, for instance. Accordingly one would perceive identity with Christ as being simply a category of religious preference. These groups have their rules and commitments and obligations. Membership is based on performance. Expulsion is threatened for violation of the rules. This perception of our identity with Christ inevitably involves a strong measure of fleshly capacity to observe the rules. For this reason, many members of God’s family are insecure and find their joy in the identity with Christ overshadowed by the obligations of performance.

The “constituency” concept of our identity with Christ is fostered in large part by the reduction of our private familial relationship to membership in institutions or organizations or societies. The rules of membership are derived not from the Scripture itself, but from humanly devised preferences as to methods of governance and worship as well as lists of preferred or forbidden activities.

In the formulation of the church as recorded in the book of Acts, we find a phrase used a number of times—*“The Lord added to the church such as were being saved.”* The word “church” is an English translation of the Greek word *ekklesia*—“the called out ones.” It is the only word used to refer to the body of Christ throughout the New Testament. It is a word that always refers to people rather than an institution or an organization. The English word “church,” which, most unfortunately, has replaced the word *ekklesia* came rather from the word *kuriake* which referred rather to the things of the Lord (as for instance “the Lord’s table”) than the people of the Lord *per se*. That word is only used twice in the New Testament. The substitute word—“church”—has served well the Roman Catholic Church, which, from the beginning, considered salvation to be mediated through the church as an institution. In her bosom, according to her, resides the destiny of all the people of God. In her mind there is no salvation outside the Church (the Roman Catholic Church). Church to them means the institution established of old in Rome (although they would carry it back further). The emphasis thus has shifted from a spiritual unity of people born into the family of God by the Holy Spirit, to earthly unity of people who are identified as members of an earthly institution.

The tragedy is that the so-called “Protestant” church has followed suit. The major difference is that the Protestant church has been decentralized as far as authority is concerned, and exists today in a myriad of fragments. But, instead of being a person who is a child of God, one is rather identified as a “Christian,” who is a member of an institution called “the Church.” Of course, in today’s world, the church is universally recognized as an institution, and not a family

of believers. Unfortunately this pervades the attitude even of the true believers, who tend to think more in terms of obligations of servitude rather than privileges of a familial membership. Of course, the members of the family have a right to form organizations within the family for the sake of convenience of services and activities connected with the faith, but the danger is that these organizations tend to overshadow the realities of the simple family tie to Christ. Christ tends to become more of a religious leader to them than a father or brother.

In the strictest sense, there are no rules or obligations involved in becoming a member of the family of God. As the text implies, our authority to be part of God's family is derived merely from our acceptance of Christ and not from the observance of certain rules and regulations. One becomes a member of the family of Christ by being "born" into it, as Jesus very clearly pointed out to Nicodemus. New life in Christ is no more a matter of obligations than new life in a human family is a matter of obligations. There are, of course, certain principles, the recognition of which can make the family more successful, but, after all, the birth of the child was the will of the parents and not of the child. It would be absurd even to think of obligations that might be the prerequisites of the birth of the child. The mother does not say to the child when it is born—"You cannot be a member of this family unless you agree to certain rules and obligations." Such an agreement would certainly be impossible for the child even if it could communicate on an intelligent level. By the same token, the newborn child of God does not have any strength within himself to agree to the rules and obligations of being a member of God's family. Paul tells the Romans that Christ died for us "when we were without strength." If we had strength in ourselves, we would not need Christ. There are, of course, many instructions in the New Testament that will help our identity with Christ to be more successful. However, Paul makes it quite clear that the flesh has no strength in itself to bring about personal perfection. In fact, he speaks to the Galatians as fools for thinking that, having begun in the Spirit, they should now be made perfect in the flesh. Jesus said to the disciples, "*Without me you can do nothing.*" It has not changed today. God tells Paul that his strength is made perfect in weakness.

There are myriad "systems" for becoming "successful Christians." These systems tend to focus on our identity with Christ not as a familial relationship but as a religious membership. To be a successful Christian is not the same as to be an acceptable member of the family of God. Successful Christianity really involves conformity to the humanly devised standards set forth by the institution called the "Church." That institution itself is not concurrent with the membership of the body of Christ. There are many members of the institution of the Church that are not members of the family of Christ. Conversely, there are many members of the family of Christ who are not members of any Church institution. In the New Testament it was true that anyone who was a member of the body of Christ was also *de facto* a member of the so-called *ekklesia*. It is not true today that everyone who is a member of the body of Christ is a member of the church, in so far as the word "church" has a different meaning than the word *ekklesia*. It is, to be sure, a matter of terminologies, but in this case the terminology is quite vital. The so-called "Church" today has only itself to blame for the confusion. Had it stayed with the original word *ekklesia* ("called out ones") it

would be assumed that we were referring to people who were called out in a special way as members of the family of Christ. The broader English term “church” is used for many societies today that have no interest in Christ whatever—for example, the Church of Scientology, Church of Religious Science, the Church of Metaphysics, etc., etc.

The fallout from this confusion of terms is that the members of the body of Christ see themselves not as part of a living family, but rather part of an institution. The idea of Christ as one’s father, or even brother, is totally lost in the sense of Christ as the religious leader of the Christian movement. Also because of this confusion, the Pope can see himself as the “vicar of Christ” on earth for all Christians, when he is in reality only the titular head of a particular segment of a religious institution.

It is not likely that the term “church” will ever be rescued from its misapplications today. The members of the body of Christ will be known collectively as “the Church” until Christ comes. What is possible is the conceptual separation—how we perceive ourselves as related to Christ. We are not members of an institution which He heads up as the religious “guru.” We are members of His family. We are not subject to humanly devised rules and regulations; we are subject to Christ as our father. We are not obligated to participate in the projects developed by the Church; we are subject to the direction of the Holy Spirit as to His own purposes for us in the world. Our success as members of the family of Christ is not measured by the concept of success as outlined by the human institution of the Church; it is measured by the vitality of our interaction with Christ on an individual basis. The relationship to Christ can no more be universally classified or ordered than the relationship between one member of the family and another. In a family, the children are all different and should properly be related to, in terms of that individuality. What works for one does not always work for another. Different kinds of motivation are needed. There are different capacities and potentials involved. There are different mental grids and emotional patterns. In the Church, the tendency to universalize everything—to assume that everyone must function exactly alike, has bred feelings of discouragement and disappointment and failure on the part of those who do not conform to the artificial standards.

The reality of the whole matter is that we are all children of God and not members of a religious constituency. The authority to become members of the family of Christ is granted merely in the acceptance of that relationship through Christ. It is a relationship based upon the sacrifice of Christ—the shedding of His blood—and not upon the acceptance of a religious formula, or vowing to adhere to certain obligations and requirements. Jesus told Nicodemus—an expert on obligations and requirements—that he could only see the kingdom of God by being “born again.” Nicodemus could not understand—“Must I enter the second time into my mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus was astonished—“Are you a teacher in Israel and do not understand? You must be born of the Spirit.” No amount of human activity can ever bring about this life. *“By grace are you saved through faith and that not of yourselves it is the gift of God not of works lest anyone should boast”* (Ephesians 2:8).

The evidence that we are members of the family of Christ is that we want to be

members of the family of Christ. It is not a matter of performance, but of preference. It is the Spirit of God that inspires this preference. “His Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God.”

If you want to be a member of the family of Christ, you are. There are many things that you can do to cultivate that relationship. There are things that the Spirit of Christ will inspire you to do. It is not what the institution of the Church asks of you; it is what the Spirit of Christ inside whispers to you, that will be the effectual essence of your favor with Christ. Performance in the flesh will always be questionable and difficult as long as we are on the earth. Fortunately, the ongoing reality of our identity with Christ is carried by the Holy Spirit and not by our fleshly religious observances. Amidst all of the difficulties of our efforts to perform successfully on the earth as members of the family of Christ, the one ongoing reality is that we are nevertheless members of His family—“As many as received Him to them gave He the authority to become the children of God.”

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