

SPIRITUAL: ORGANIZED RELIGION

LifeGroup PARTICIPANT'S Guide
Tom Haines - FEBCentral

INTRODUCTION

Read the following intro together (dividing it up between two people).

One of the most common ways the word “spiritual” is used today is to mean “I believe in a higher power but not in organized religion.” The reluctance towards organized religion is understandable given the many ways in which people have sought and still seek to use it for personal gain, power, control, and empire building. But just because humans tend to abuse of something, doesn’t make it wrong. Take families for example. Just because some families are dysfunctional and have produced despots and murders doesn’t cause us to doubt the value of family and it’s contribution to producing healthy individuals and societies. So for the discerning Christian, the question is not what do people think about organized religion, but what does God say?

Did you know that though Jesus opposed the fear driven, control-based, power-mongering organized religion of his day, his solution was not anti-religion? Jesus called his followers into a family--an organized group called the church--complete with structure (including values, expectations, roles, routines, accountability, etc). Just as you were born into a family, so too as Christians we’re “born again” into God’s family, the church. Church is God’s home for growing Christians and for sharing his love. Together we’re going to explore who we are as a church and what it means to be part of the church.

DISCUSSION

1. Pick one of the following:
 - a. If I was to underline one sentence in the intro it would be . . .
 - b. If I could add anything to the intro it would be . . .
 - c. My take away from Tom Haine’s messages Sunday was . . .
2. What are your earliest memories of church - sights, sounds, emotions, experiences?

Read Matthew 16:13-20, 18:15-20.

3. The four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) are inspired biographical accounts of Jesus’ life from four different followers and eyewitnesses of Christ. It’s interesting to note that only Matthew records Jesus using the term “church,” and only twice (16:18 &

18:17). Let's try to find at least four facts or characteristics regarding Jesus' teaching on the church from these passages.

4. Your leaders will share our list of four characteristics. After each characteristic discuss this question; How does this help us understand what makes for a healthy versus unhealthy church?

Just as God never intended for there to be orphan Christians so too he never intended for orphan churches, one disassociated from other churches. For example, take the New Testament letters like 1st & 2nd Corinthians, Ephesians, Philippians and Galatians, they were all written to local structured churches in a given city. But the letters were also circulated to all the other churches of the day and preserved for us so that everyone can benefit from them.

5. As a local church, Bay Park has developed strong partnerships locally but also is a part of a movement of churches regionally and nationally. It's called *The Fellowship* which is short for *The Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches of Canada* (now there's a mouthful!). Read together the Fellowship History located in Appendix A then discuss the value and challenges of being part of the Fellowship.
6. ***Next Level*** We've been known to say that we are small "b" baptists. We thank God for the rich diversity of denominational backgrounds of people who call Bay Park home. In what ways are denominational ties important for local churches? If you came from another denomination why did you call a baptist church home?
7. **Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-27.** One idea is to go around the room and have one person read a verse at a time. Isn't it strange that when it comes to Costco memberships, few people have an issue, but when it comes to church membership, there's all sorts of excuses?
 - a. Reread verse 27. Did you notice that Paul didn't say the church is *like* a body but that the church *is* a body? Did you also note that every believer is a *member* of the body? When you read the word "member" in the Bible think medically--as in the members of your physical body--not economically as in your Netflix membership. Think of someone losing a finger or a toe. They have been traumatically dismembered; an essential part of their body has been separated from them. That's the *actual biblical terminology*! Yet in North American culture being separated from the body of believers is not seen as tragic. It's seen as normal.
 - b. What are some of the common explanations in North America people frequently use to attempt to justify their dismembership from the church?

Regardless of how the culture sees it or Christians misunderstand it, membership is not simply an opportunity to say, I'm a part of a club, but rather a scriptural expression of covenant connectedness to a church. Read through the following list, with one person reading a different point.

- A. Membership reflects what the church is. Membership is a reflection of the organic community already existing in the body. Paul says we are a body. Can one part say to the

other, “I’m not part of you”? No, it is already a part. To reject the value of membership is to deny what God has already established in fact.

- B. The Bible teaches covenant community. Covenant communities both encourage one another as well as hold each other accountable. In Paul’s letters to the Corinthians, those who broke covenant with Christ and his body through either their doctrine and/or living were put out of the body. The purpose of such last resort action was discipline in view of repentance and restoration (cf 1 Cor 5:1-2 vs 2 Cor 2:5-8). And it worked, a wayward believer was brought back to saving grace. Without membership there is no covenant relationship, mutual encouragement or accountability.
- C. As believers we need it. Membership is not just for the sake of the church, it’s also for the sake of every individual believer. Lone Ranger, just Jesus and me, individualist Christianity is not Christian, it’s a myth. To be saved, redeemed, born again, is to be placed by God into the body. Think of it this way, if Jesus is your king, then you also need to recognize that every king has a kingdom, and within that kingdom are also subjects. Together we are God’s kingdom.
- D. Membership is counter cultural in a low-commitment environment. We are immersed in a consumer culture. One that caters to our wants and promises to satisfy our preferences. When our expectations aren’t met, we can always move on to the next product, provider, job or spouse. Becoming a member is a concrete way of saying with Jesus, I’m here to give not get. Serve, not be served. Even if I’m only in town for a few years.
- E. Church membership keeps us accountable. Mark Dever, in his book *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, writes,

Church membership is our opportunity to grasp hold of each other in responsibility and love. By identifying ourselves with a particular church, we let the pastors and other members of that local church know that we intend to be committed in attendance, giving, prayer, and service. We allow fellow believers to have great expectations of us in these areas, and we make it known that we are the responsibility of this local church. We assure the church of our commitment to Christ in serving with them, and we call for their commitment to serve and encourage as well.

8. Which point is the most compelling for you? Which one confuses or challenges you?

If you’re considering membership at Bay Park, it’s a fairly straightforward process!

- I. First and foremost you need to profess faith in Jesus as the one who rescues you from your sin.
- II. Have you been baptized? It is mandatory for membership. If not, we can fix that!
 - A. Baptism at Bay Park link.
- III. Inform one of the elders of your interest in membership (see Appendix B for contact info) and they will...
 - A. Give you a membership package to fill out;
 - B. and, Schedule a meeting with you.

- IV. Upon successful completion of the above a Sunday will be picked to announce and receive you into membership.
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PRAYER

Take some to pray for Bay Park, the churches in Kingston, our Fellowship as well as any special prayer requests that come up.

Perhaps each individual (who's comfortable praying) can pick one of the four and pray whatever the Lord has placed on their heart throughout the study.

APPENDIX A - History of *The Fellowship*

The Fellowship includes over 500 churches, in over 15 languages, with a total Sunday morning attendance of over 80,000. The churches of the Fellowship stretch from Whitehorse, Yukon to the tip of Nova Scotia.

Between 1953 and 1965 four pre-existing regional groups merged to create the Fellowship as it's known today: (1) The Union of Regular Baptist Churches of Ontario and Quebec; (2) The Fellowship of Independent Baptist Churches; (3) The Regular Baptist Missionary Fellowship of Alberta; and, (4) The Convention of Regular Baptists Churches of British Columbia. At a time of significant debate surrounding the role of Christ and Scripture these groups joined together in order to support one another in their evangelical convictions on the work of Christ and the authority and inspiration of the Bible.

The Fellowship grew steadily from its inception in 1953 into the mid-1980s. Then it began to level off and seek new initiatives for revitalization. Fellowship Vision 2000, a 10-year strategy for developing strong, reproducing local churches, was implemented in 1990 after some slippage had occurred. Over the decade, 87 new churches were started. A new Ministry Plan was launched in 2000 encouraging our churches to seek spiritual renewal, grow healthy churches, and plant churches strategically.

Structurally the Fellowship is represented by National and Regional work. Regions are to deliver to our member churches ministries that support church health, leadership development, and church multiplication. National serves our Regions and churches and additionally organizes Fellowship International, the Fellowship Francophone ministry, and Fellowship Chaplaincy, to provide opportunities for missionaries to serve in close relationship to our churches.

Our motto as a Fellowship is: *Serve. Unite. Thrive.* The local church is God's gift to our nation. The local church is the hope of the world. The Fellowship's future is a bright and hopeful

one as we continue to establish prevailing churches throughout Canada and beyond. We give thanks for the faithful and fruitful days of the Fellowship in the past, and we humbly ask the Lord of the harvest to grant us renewal in the future to the expansion of His Kingdom and the praise of His glory.

APPENDIX B - Elders Contact Info

Contact the Bay Park Office: office@baypark.ca

OR

Matthew Bartlett - matthew@bartlettcomm.ca

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