

“Dropping Members From Church”

Dear Antwort Mann,

Answer me this: What do you think about holding members of a church accountable for their attendance? I’ve heard of some Lutheran pastors who have actually dropped someone’s membership in the church because they refuse to come on a regular basis. Do you agree or disagree with this, and is there a Biblical reference on why this could happen to members?

Signed, “The Excommunicated”

Dear “Excommunicated,”

Hopefully, the pen name you gave yourself is not a reality. That would not be good. But in answer to your inquiry, let’s establish a few important points first. In Holy Baptism, and through faith in Jesus Christ, we are made members of His Body, The Church. Only those who have faith in Christ are part of His Body. Often, when we are baptized, we are also connected to one of the many visible manifestations of The Church – i.e. a local congregation of people who gather together around God’s “Means of Grace,” which are His Word and Sacraments.

While membership in the Body of Christ is God’s doing, because He is the one who works faith in us, membership in a local congregation tends to be our doing. Especially in America, we tend to “pick and choose” where and when we will go to church. Generally, in the Lutheran Church, members obligate themselves to certain things: Believing in the doctrines taught by the Church; living lifestyles consistent with the teaching of Holy Scripture; and regular involvement with fellow members in hearing God’s Word and making right use of the Sacraments. In fact, we vowed to God and our fellow members to do just that at our Confirmation. We made a promise, and are rightly expected to keep it.

The pastor and leaders of the congregation, especially the Elders, have the task of watching out for the souls of those who are members and encouraging them to be faithful in worship and in hearing God’s Word. When someone starts to drift away, our desire is to bring them back, not for our benefit, but for theirs. Phone calls, visits, letters, etc. are ways through which the church tries to reach out to members who are inactive to become active again in receiving with us the gifts of God. This is just what Christians should do for each other. We don’t want to get rid of people; we want them, as fellow members of the congregation, to be active partakers with us of God’s blessings in Christ.

But there are some folks who, for whatever reason, will not participate in the life of the congregation by attending the Divine Services. They refuse to listen to encouragement or admonition to repent and return. After an extended period of time, they may eventually have their memberships dropped by reason of “Self Exclusion.” Using marriage as an analogy, it would be like someone deserting his wife, wanting nothing to do with her even while claiming he still wants to be married to her. She finally goes through the proceedings to divorce him since, because of his actions and his choices, there really is no longer a marriage.

In the Lutheran Church, the pastor does not have the power to drop anyone from the membership. He can recommend that action, but it has to be carried out by the congregation, usually through its elected leaders on the Board of Elders. This is done only after great

deliberation, much effort to reach out to the inactive member and a lot of anxious prayer. When it becomes painfully obvious that this individual wants no part of the congregation (except for certain perks, perhaps, like marriages or funerals), then they are removed from membership. We don't "drop" them; they have dropped themselves, and we are simply ratifying their choice.

NOTE: This discussion is about those who could be coming to church but "refuse to come on a regular basis (your words)." This does not apply to the sick, the elderly, the shut in, and those away at college or the military. Those who would be in church, but can't are not the issue.

NOTE #2: Decisions also have to be made regarding those who move away permanently and are unable to ever attend Services locally. We try to encourage them to join a nearby congregation and transfer their membership to it. But if that doesn't happen, there is a point where their membership is simply dropped because we cannot effectively minister to them any longer.

You asked if I agree or disagree with the practice of dropping people's memberships. While I don't like having to remove inactive people from membership, I like less the reason why most are removed: because they are putting their eternal life in jeopardy by choosing to neglect God's Word and Supper, and by breaking the vows they made before Him. This action of dropping a person from membership is, on occasion, a necessary duty the congregation must perform. Perhaps it will finally wake that person up to their sin and neglect of God's Word, and they repent and come back. It also drives home to other members the necessity to continue faithfully in God's Word. In any event, when this action is taken, it is emphasized to that individual that, when then are ready to actively renew their membership, they would be welcomed back with open arms.

You also asked for some Scripture to back this up. The passages below are divided up into three categories: God's will for the Christian to worship, hear His Word and gather regularly with fellow Christians; the authority Christ gives to the church to admonish and discipline; and the action to be taken by the church, and by our Lord, to the one who despises, or is apathetic toward His Word.

I. The Christian's Involvement in Worship and Word:

- Exodus 20:8 "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy." Luther's Small Catechism: "What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it."
- John 8:31 [Jesus said] "If you *continue* in My word, you are truly My disciples."
- John 11:28 [Jesus said] "Blessed are they who hear the Word of God and keep ("safeguard") it."
- Acts 2:42 "They [Christians] devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."

II. The Church's Duty and Authority to Encourage, Admonish and Discipline:

- Hebrews 10:23, 25 “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering . . . not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”
- James 5:19-20 “My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.”
- Matthew 18:18 [Jesus said] “I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”
- John 20:22-23 [Jesus] breathed on His disciples and said, “if you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

III. The Action to be Taken Toward Members Who Despise and Neglect God’s Word:

- Matthew 18:(15-16) 17 [Jesus said] “...If he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a pagan or a tax collector (i.e. “an outcast”).”
- 1 Corinthians 5:5, 13 [St. Paul writes] “You are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord . . . Purge the evil person from among you.”
- 1 John 2:19 “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us.”
- Revelation 3:16 [Jesus said] “Because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spit you out of My mouth.”

So, you see, as God’s Christians, it is His will that we gather together around His Word and the forgiveness that Christ gives through the Divine Service. We are to care for each other, and encourage one another in the faith. But for the one who consistently despises God’s gifts, and refuses to partake of them, they really aren’t true members of the congregation and are to be removed as a warning and a call to repentance before it’s too late.

“Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out.” Acts 3:19

Best Regards,
Der Antwort Mann