

Spiritual Church vs Legal Church

I am putting forth this concept to aid in understanding different challenges churches face particularly with church membership and actual ownership of church property. I in no way wish to lesson the Spiritual Church at all, but at the same time there is reality to deal with – which only the Legal Church can handle.

Spiritual Church

First, there is the Spiritual Church. This is the called-out assembly of believers that the Bible talks so much about. It is the body of Christ that is made up of saved, baptized Christians. This is what we all normally think about when we think of the Church.

However, there is a small problem. The Spiritual Church has no possible way of owning anything at all. The spiritual church exists in the eyes of God but it is unknown to governments. It cannot own property or even open up a bank account. So, thus the need for the Legal Church.

The Legal Church is needed in order to own property. If the Spiritual Church only meets in people's homes and has no bank accounts, then there is no need to organize a Legal Church. My church in Rwanda continued for 17 years as a Spiritual Church. One reason was that Rwanda actually stopped all church registration for our first 11 years in the country! But we were alright because we met in a rented school and we had no bank accounts.

Also, think about the great Spiritual Churches that exist or existed in repressive countries such as China, Russia, or the Roman Empire of long ago. Great Spiritual Churches that had to meet in secret and they had no way of ever owning property because those governments would not allow it.

Legal Church

The Legal Church is NOT mentioned anywhere in the Bible except maybe with the one verse: **1 Corinthians 14:40 *Let all things be done decently and in order.*** I look at the Legal Church as a necessary evil. If a Spiritual Church wants to own property, then they must create a Legal Church. I recently ended an interesting conversation with a local pastor like this: If the missionary wanted to give this property to the church, he cannot, because you don't even exist – as a Legal Church that is.

The Legal Church is governed by the laws of the country. It is how the church obtains a legal identity. This legal identity allows the church to own property, open up bank accounts, and conduct other business type activities that they wish.

Please keep in mind, the Bible does not govern the Legal Church – the local government does. The government has full control over the Legal Church. The government writes the laws

of how to get setup, how to continue, meetings that are necessary, yearly reports, necessary leadership positions, and even how members can join. If you don't like those government controls, then meet in secret and own nothing.

Actually, not all people in the Spiritual Church are even allowed to join the Legal Church. Well, at least in Rwanda, a person was required to be at least 18 years old to join. So, if a 12-year-old boy got saved and baptized, then obviously he would be part of the Spiritual Church but he could not be part of the Legal Church.

Becoming a Member

So, with this Legal Church, it is very important to set good rules on how a person can become a member. Remember, when a person becomes a member of the Legal Church they become part OWNER of whatever buildings, properties, or bank accounts the church has! It is very important to have good members join that will love and cherish the Spiritual Church first and therefore be good stewards of the Legal Church. Here are some different membership possibilities that I have encountered in my travels:

1. Every person that gets saved and baptized is automatically made a member. But there are some big problems with this. We did this in Rwanda for a while (even though we were not officially registered). After several years, we had a big list of hundreds of people that were part of the church but were no where to be found. If we were really registered, all those people would be part owner of whatever we had. They would be members of the Legal Church but by the very fact that they never came to church – they were NOT members of the Spiritual Church.

Remember in the book of Acts, it never shows that people were suddenly given ownership of lands when they were added to the church. They were simply added to the Spiritual Church.

2. A small committee are the only members of the Legal Church. I heard of a church where only 3 people control all the assets of a church! They make all the decisions and have all power to buy and sell properties. This is not good. It cuts most of the Spiritual Church out of decision making. The goal is to represent as much as possible the entire Spiritual Church into the Legal Church.

3. Those who prove themselves should be members of the Legal Church. I have come to like this idea. Thoughts on proving oneself can vary, but let a person at least be in the church for some months before giving him part ownership of the buildings. OR let them go through a 10 week discipleship class first. OR prove themselves some other way that shows they love God and they love the Spiritual Church. AND they are willing to sacrifice themselves in time, money, or hard work for the benefit of the Spiritual Church. Only then will they be a good member of the Legal Church.

Leaving the Church

To leave the Spiritual Church is simple: One just stops going to church. But leaving a Legal Church is more difficult. There needs to be by-laws on how to remove people from membership.

If a person backslides and becomes a drunkard, do you want that person to still have a say so in the Legal Church? Of course not! Or others may just move away. What if people stop coming to church? What if they only come 2 times per year? In any case, there needs to be rules on how to Legally remove people from the Legal Church membership.

It is so very important to only keep people on the Legal Church membership that really have a heart for the church. It also should go without saying, that whoever is head, CEO, or President of the Legal Church should also be Pastor of the Spiritual Church. It is important to have these two churches work, act, and look as much as possible as one church – even though they really are two different things.

Are you a real member?

Finally, is there a way for people to know and prove that they are part of the Legal Church? Some churches give out membership cards every year, some only tell the person. Some print a yearly membership list. Some churches also give out a copy of the church constitution upon joining. After all, if they are to be Legally involved, shouldn't they have a copy so they know what they are a part of?



Here is a thought: If you go to a church and are NEVER involved in any Legal Church meetings, then it is obvious that you are NOT a member of the Legal Church. And if those meetings NEVER take place openly at all, then ask: Who really are the owners of the Legal Church? Because by government law, those meeting must take place!

Again, the Legal Church is NOT governed by the Bible. There are so many different ways in the world that churches handle the Legal ownership of properties. I hope this gives a bit of clarification about some of the different possibilities. God bless you as you work through this important issue for your church.

God Bless,

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