

Church Membership

Introduction. Church membership is often not the priority it should be. There are a few possible explanations for this: (1) lack of understanding of church membership and its importance, (2) lack of commitment, or (3) a lack of desire to submit to biblical authority. This will only cover the first issue, lack of understanding. I think it can be assumed that if you are a Christian you should be committed (see for example Rom. 12:1) and you should submit to biblical authority (see for example Heb. 13:17).

What is Church Membership? When a person is born again by the Spirit they instantly become a member of the *invisible* universal Church body. Church membership is a formal covenant of a believer to a local *visible* church body for mutual growth and accountability.

Reasons for and Advantages of Church membership. There are several reasons to be connected to a local church body: worshiping together (Col. 3:16; Eph. 5:19-21), equipping (Col. 1:28; Eph. 4:12-13), exhortation and teaching (1 Tim. 4:13), exercising spiritual gifts (Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 12:4-7; 1 Pet. 4:10-11), church discipline (Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5), sharing the Lord's Supper (Luke 22:17-20; Matt. 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24), celebrating baptism (Matt. 28:19), giving (Matt. 23:23; 1 Tim. 6:17-19), encouragement (Heb. 10:24-25), as well as, having faithful leaders to care for and help you (1 Tim. 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9).

There are also many "one another" passages that can only be followed in connection with a local church. We are to honor one another (Rom. 12:20). We are to accept one another (Rom. 15:7). We are to bear with bear with one another (Eph. 4:2; Col. 3:13). We are to forgive one another (Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13). We are to pray for and confess sins to one another (James 5:16). We are to cheer and challenge one another (Heb. 3:13; 10:24-25). We are to admonish and confront one another (Rom. 15:14; Col. 3:16; Gal. 6:1-6). We are to warn one another (1 Thess. 5:14). We are to teach one another (Col. 3:16). We are to not be gossip, slander, or be fake with one another (Gal. 5:15; Rom. 12:9). We are to bear one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2). We are to share possessions (Acts 4:32). We are to submit to one another (Eph. 5:21).

There are also several other advantages to church membership. Church discipline may not seem like an advantage but it is. It may be the very thing to deliver a soul from hell, (1 Cor. 5:5) this is a true and gracious advantage. As a member, you can vote on specific church issues. Church membership is a covenant of commitment one to another. Through church membership you clearly know who your brothers and sisters are. Members have church resources available to them that otherwise would not be. Not only through use of the property but also pastoral services. The pastor cannot be as available to do weddings and funerals to nonmembers as he can for those that have

covenanted to the church body. Members also have more opportunities to serve in the churches' various ministries. Lastly, church membership is biblical.

Church Membership is Biblical. "Biblical? Where is the chapter and verse," you ask. Well, there is no chapter and verse that states *explicitly* that you must join a church. Yet, I believe we can see it *implicit* in the New Testament. In the book of Acts we see that the early churches' practice was to baptize believers and *then* add them to the church (Acts 2:41, 47; 5:14; 16:5). In fact, those that were saved and baptized in the early church "devoted themselves" (which could have taken the form of a formal covenant) to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, and prayer (Acts 2:41-42). There is no explicit text calling believers to belong to a church because it was everywhere assumed and practiced in the early church so there was no need for a formal statement.

We see that there was a list of widows that were entitled to financial support (1 Tim. 5:9) and there may also have been a growing list of church members (see for example Acts 2:41, 47; 5:14; 16:5). Churches would also write a letter of commendation (Acts 18:27; Rom. 16:1; Col. 4:10; cf. 2 Cor. 3:1-2) for believers that were moving to a different area. This leads us to conclude that church roles were likely kept in the early church. However, even if they did not have a formal list they obviously knew who was part of the body and this was very important to them and should be to us as well.

We also see a New Testament mandate for godly qualified leadership. Men who are called to shepherd the church (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2) by laboring (1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 5:17), and watching over souls (Heb. 13:17). Pastors (a synonym of elders and shepherds) will give an account to God of how they shepherded so it is important that they know who their sheep are.

Church membership is implied from church discipline (see Matt. 18:15-17; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 1 Tim. 5:20; Titus 3:10-11) and it assumes that the elders of the church will know who the members of the church are. We also see much biblical imagery that points us to church membership. The church is called: body, bride, family, royal priesthood. These things suggest tight connection, even formal covenant. We as the church are to be like an outpost in enemy territory, an embassy amongst a distant land. If you are a citizen of the heavenly Kingdom you should be connected to the local embassy. The church is that embassy, the church represents the Kingdom of God on earth.

There are many things today that contribute to the general lack of concern for church membership. In the early church there were actually many reasons why someone would not want to join a church and identified as a follower of Christ. Even the name Christian was intended to be derogatory. This was because the followers of Jesus Christ followed someone that was crucified. Crucifixion was a terrible public shame for Jew and Gentile and yet Christians confessed that Jesus, a crucified man, was their Lord. Obviously, if you did not believe what they claimed then what they claimed would seem obscene. For instance, a piece of graffiti has been found, dated variously between the first and third century known as the *Alexamenos graffito*. It is a drawing of a man worshipping a man that has the head of a donkey who is being crucified.

We also know historically that there has been much persecution of Christians. We even see this in the book of Hebrews. It says that they “endured a hard struggle with sufferings, . . . sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated” (10:32b-33). They even joyfully accepted the plundering of their property (v. 34). Why is this significant? This is significant because the writer knew that persecution would likely result from identification with the church and yet still says do not neglect meeting together (v. 25).

Did the writer of Hebrews think that the recipients had a legitimate excuse to not formally identify themselves with the other brothers and sisters in the church? No! Even though they, as well as most of the early church, could face great persecution because of their relationship with the church. If they did not have an excuse then we certainly do not. Cultural trends being what they are does not give pastors an excuse to not teach on the importance of this subject either. Even in the face of persecution, the Hebrew writer remained bold. The subject is that important.

Conclusion. Local church membership, though obviously not required for salvation, is vital. It is my desire that you would covenant yourself together with the local body and bride of Christ to be committed to be and do what Christ our Lord has called us to do as we await His return.

Suggested Resources

- Introductory: Jonathan Leeman, *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012).
- In-depth: Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010).