



Church Membership

“If the church is a building, then we must be bricks in it; if the church is a body, then we are its members; if the church is a household of faith, then we are part of that household. Sheep are in a flock, and branches on a vine. Biblically, if we are Christians we must be members of a church. This membership is not simply the record of a statement we once made or of affection toward a familiar place. It must be the reflection of a living commitment or it is worthless.”

—Mark Dever

Church membership is a very serious issue in the Christian life and in the life of any true church. Despite the objections some churches have voiced against the concept of church membership, Scripture gives us several ecclesiastical imperatives that seem impossible to fulfill without biblical membership: church discipline, voting, submitting to pastors/elders, one another imperative of the New Testament all seem quite impossible without some sort of membership structure where a person “joins” the church. Here is the why, who, when, and what of membership.

Why?

The reason church membership is important is because Scripture teaches it. In a number of ways both explicitly and implicitly, Scripture presents a comprehensive theology of membership. The Bible has always believed in “church” membership. That is, that even in Old Testament times, the people of God had a history of knowing who was “in” and who was “out.” The twelve tribes of Israel are a good example of the fact that the covenant community of God’s people have always kept track, meticulous track in fact, of those who were considered in the covenant community. The New Covenant church is different in that, only those who have been born again should have access to church membership because they alone are in the New Covenant, they alone “know the Lord” (Jer. 31.31-34).

It is this New Covenant church that Jesus instituted (Mt. 16.18). As the church of Christ we have been given the task of making disciples (Mt. 28.19-20), execute church discipline (Mt. 18.15-18), we must be able to identify our leaders (Heb.

13.7), identify fellow members (1 John 2.19), and shepherds should be able to identify their sheep (1 Pet. 5.2). Just like there is a church “role” in heaven representative of the universal church (Heb. 12.22-23), there are corresponding roles on earth to identify and track the visible church (Acts 2.41, 47; 6.7; 1 Tim. 5.9). We are all of the body of Christ and as such each part should be accounted for. Participation in the body of Christ, however it may be formalized, is not negotiable for the believer who is following Christ as His *Lord*. Wayne Mack points out the biblical importance of this aspect of the believer’s life:

“Scripture speaks very clearly to the fact that identification with God’s people in a formal, public way was considered essential in...New Testament times... A careful study of the New Testament doesn’t reveal even a hint of any believer who was truly saved, but not part of a local church.”

Who?

1 John 2.19 makes it clear that only those who are truly regenerate are “of us” and thus will “remain with us.” One of the biggest problems today in the Church is unregenerate church membership. One does not become part of the invisible church because he/she has attended membership courses or completed church membership curriculum; instead, our participation in the invisible church is by virtue of our union with Christ who is the Head of the Church (Eph. 1.22; 4.15). It is the task of the visible church to add to its membership those who are truly in God’s invisible church. Regardless of the fact that apostasy is real and that unfortunately there are those who will fall away e.g. Judas, Demas, it is still necessary to use great caution with who is admitted to church membership. The elders are to use wisdom and discernment which is guided by the Word of God as to who is allowed into the sheepfold of the visible church to influence and impact its members. The concern must always be to allow into membership only those men and women who have clear evidence of the transforming grace of God in their life expressed through a valid testimony of salvation, participation in baptism, and a submission to the Lordship of Christ over their lives (Rom. 6.17). When such conditions are met, church membership should be granted with joy and gladness as the whole church welcomes its new members.

When?

Many churches are quite bent on administering membership to anyone that is interested. But church membership should be done wisely and with much prayer. Joining a church is a very important matter that should not be done hastily. The church we join will impact our spiritual well being either for good or bad.

Likewise the leadership of the church has an obligation to use caution with who is allowed to join since the health of the existing members is also at stake. If a person is not baptized and desires to join the church, baptism will be required as part of the membership process. Through due diligence and wise counsel and barring that there are no outstanding discipline issues from other congregations or matters of sin that disqualify a person from membership, a person will be welcomed into the membership of the church. Although there is no specific timeline, nevertheless a wise membership process should neither hinder nor rush church membership. God makes things beautiful in His time.

What ?

When we commit to one another in membership, we are signing up for spiritual accountability on many levels. In fact, Paul would say that we are all part of one another (1 Cor. 12.13; Eph. 4.11-16, 25). Much like a physical family we are committed to loving each other, caring for one another, correcting one another, admonishing, and rebuking each other (Rom. 15.14). Scripture is full of “one another” theology that teaches us how to relate to other members of the church. Yet, the key purpose of body life is *edification*. God’s Word is central to the edification and spiritual nourishment of the people of God in the local church (Col. 3.16). For this reason church attendance is absolutely essential for healthy church membership. If we are not present for the worship services of the church to listen to the voice of God through the preaching of His Word how can we truly be fulfilling all that Scripture calls us to do on Sunday and throughout the week? If we are not united in the preaching ministry of the church, all other church ministries will suffer. The preaching ministry of the church is the lifeline of the church’s fellowship (Acts 2.42). In addition to this, *all* members have gifts that must be employed for the health of the church (1 Cor. 12.4; 2 Tim. 4.5). When members do not act and function as they should it deeply wounds and hinders the church from being as healthy and pure as it could be (1 Cor. 12.21). As such every member is required to strive for the unity of the church (Phil. 2.1-4) by prayerfully, financially, and spiritually supporting the ministry of the local church. Ultimately every member is called to peace, love, and unity as we serve one another with humble Christ centered hearts (John 13.15). We have all been united by one Spirit for the purpose of magnifying God with one voice through our corporate worship and good order (Rom. 15.5-6).

Sadly today too many Christians make light of the importance of church membership and do not strive towards the unity and edification of Christ’s body the church. People come and go as they please, pastors are unable to know their sheep, faithful attendees often see no commitment from others in situations where

a robust doctrine of church membership is not implemented. Perhaps no one taught us to take our membership in His church more serious than the Lord of the Church Himself, Jesus Christ who took sovereign ownership of the spiritual entity He called, "... *My church*" (Matt. 16.18; Heb. 12.22-24). Jesus placed infinite value on the church which He had to purchase with His blood we ought to do the same (cf. Acts 20.28).

"If Jesus is committed to the church, should we be any less committed to it?"

— Mark Dever

Soli Deo Gloria