

# WHY CHURCH MEMBERSHIP?

## Introduction

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- Why should someone become a member of a church?
- After all, membership is not directly commanded anywhere in Scripture, so why encourage people to become members?
- Some reasons NOT to become a member of a church:
  1. To have voting rights
  2. To be able to gain a position of leadership
  3. To become part of the “club”
- The main reason for becoming a church member is to GIVE!
- It is to give yourself to the cause of Christ
- It is to give yourself to a group of people who together seek to glorify the Lord and carry out His purposes
- It is to identify with a local body of believers
- It is to submit to that church’s leadership
- It is a willingness to use your spiritual gifts in the body of Christ
- It is to give sacrificially to that body - to invite accountability
- The purpose of church membership is PRIMARILY to give and not to get!!
- It can be summarized in 1 word: Commitment!
- It is to demonstrate commitment to Jesus Christ and full participation in His body, the church
- It is a commitment to follow God’s expectations for normal Christianity within the local church
- Despite this, however, there are a couple things that complicate that today:
  1. The Democratic Model
    - We have democracy ingrained into our mindset
    - You become a citizen of the US and get to vote; likewise, you become a member of the church and get to vote
    - We tend to read the model of leadership in our country into the church
  2. A Lack of Commitment
    - Commitment is a rare commodity today
    - There is an aversion to commitment and accountability in our culture today
    - And that mentality has slowly seeped into the church
    - Church membership is a low priority for many believers
    - Some are formal members but attend church only occasionally (Christmas, Easter)...not heartily involved in the church
    - Some are church hoppers - moving from church to church never committing themselves to a body of believers...never becoming devoted, committed participants...they prefer to remain strangers...they want to remain anonymous in order to live autonomously...for them, church is a spectator sport...they are just passing through...no one really ever gets to know them...never challenged in their behavior or doctrine
    - Some use the smorgasbord...buffet approach – go to one church for music, another church for the teaching, another church for youth ministries...they never settle in at a church and

- Some attend church regularly and are active participants but have not committed themselves as formal members...they want to avoid the personal responsibility that membership entails...dislike authority...ignore the corporate element
- To neglect or refuse to join a church as a member or to join a church solely for the purpose of gaining voting privileges or the right to a church office is to misunderstand a believer's responsibility to the body of Christ
- It also cuts them off from many of the blessings and opportunities that come about as a result of being a member
- So it is important to understand what church membership is and why it matters

The church should be less like a cruise ship and more like a battleship...Rather than emphasizing their casual atmosphere and fun activities, it's time for churches to raise the bar, to focus on a serious mission, and ensure that every person aboard serves a vital function.

~Ken Sande

- It is important that we understand what church membership is and why it matters
- We need to understand that church membership best achieves the commitment and identification with Christ that God intends for his people throughout the Bible and in the New Testament church

## The Biblical Basis for Church Membership

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- What is "church membership?" – it is a means of identifying those who are committed to the church and who want to be held accountable for their Christian walk
- It is the believer's agreement with the purpose and mission of the church and a commitment to participate in the life of the church for mutual caring, spiritual growing, and accountability
- The biblical evidence for church membership is abundant and overwhelming
- Scripture teaches that when a person becomes a believer in Christ, they are automatically and immediately made a member of the universal church which consists of all believers of all time
- At the point of salvation, believers are immediately placed in body of Christ

*1 Corinthians 12:13 ~ For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.*

- Because of their union with Christ, believers are placed into a body with fellow believers
- And that membership in the universal church qualifies a person to become a member of a local church
- God's purpose is to take those believers who comprise the universal church and weld them together into a local body of believers which cares for, ministers to, and serves each other
- That's why the idea of being a Christian without belonging to a local church is foreign to the New Testament
- And that's what church membership is about...it is about formally committing yourself to an identifiable, local body of believers
- It is about purposefully and intentionally joining together with a group of like-minded believers for fulfilling the purposes of the church as outlined in the New Testament
- Let's look at 5 evidences for formal church membership

### **An Apparent List of Members in the Early Church**

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- There seemed to be a list of members, or at least a general accounting of believers in the early church

*Acts 2:41 ~ So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls*

*Acts 2:47 ~ ...And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved*

*Acts 4:4 ~ But many of those who had heard the message believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand*

*Acts 5:14 ~ And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their number*

*Acts 6:7 ~ The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith*

*Acts 11:21 ~ And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord*

*Acts 14:1 ~ In Iconium they entered the synagogue of the Jews together, and spoke in such a manner that a large number of people believed, both of Jews and of Greeks.*

*Acts 16:5 ~ So the churches were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily."*

- When individuals repented and believed in Christ, they were baptized and added to the church...They were identified, numbered, and joined with the body for mutual learning, service, fellowship, and accountability
- They joined together formally with other believers in a local assembly and committed themselves to each other and the divinely instructed activities of the church

### **The Terminology Referring to the Early Church**

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- Much of the terminology used in Acts to refer to the church fits with the concept of formal church membership

*Acts 6:5 ~ the whole congregation*

*Acts 8:1 ~ the church in Jerusalem*

*Acts 9:26 ~ the disciples in Jerusalem*

*Acts 14:23 ~ in every church*

*Acts 15:17 ~ the whole church*

*Acts 20:17 ~ elders of the church*

- Those terms suggest a recognizable church membership and an identifiable group of people
- Those were not just amorphous groups of people
- They were most likely a definite group of individuals who comprised that church
- What their membership process was, we don't know, but it does seem that they constituted a definite group of people

### **The Responsibilities of Elders**

- The pattern in the New Testament is that a plurality of elders is to shepherd and oversee each local body of believers...not a senior pastor...but all elders equally share the responsibility of shepherding the flock
- Those elders are given specific responsibilities: shepherd the flock, oversee the flock, feed the flock, protect the flock

*1 Peter 5:2-3 ~ shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock*

- Those responsibilities require that there be a distinguishable membership in the local church...How can elders shepherd if they don't know who they are to shepherd?
- Instructions to elders to shepherd assumes that there is an identifiable group of people
- Peter even says who they are to shepherd – “those allotted to your charge”
- Implies specific people given by the Lord

*Acts 20:28 ~ Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.*

- Those responsibilities require that there be a distinguishable membership in the local church...How can elders shepherd if they don't know who they are to shepherd?

*1 Thessalonians 5:12 ~ But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction*

- “have charge” implies a specific group of people which the elders are responsible for
- Assumes that a special relationship exists between church elders and the members of the church that these men have a responsibility to shepherd
- Elders are primarily responsible to shepherd those who have submitted themselves to the care and the authority of the leadership

*Hebrews 13:17 ~ Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you*

- “they keep watch over your souls” - elders are tasked with the responsibility of watching over the souls of those in their church
- “they must give an account” – elders can only give an account for those who commit themselves to the church
- It is impossible that elders rule over or watch out for everyone who walks in the door of a church or who casually attends here and there with no real commitment

- Elders have certain specific responsibilities that presuppose a group of church members who were under their care
- Elders can shepherd, lead, feed, protect, watch over, give account for only if they know who they are
- They can give oversight only if they know those for whom they are responsible

### **The Practice of Church Discipline**

**Matthew 18:15-17** ~ *If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*

- These verses describe the practice of church discipline and the steps involved in it:
  - Step 1 – go individually
  - Step 2 – go with 1 or 2 more
  - Step 3 – tell it to church
  - Step 4 – remove person from church
- This implies a specific group of people within the church

**1 Corinthians 5:1-2, 13** ~ *It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife. You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst... REMOVE THE WICKED MAN FROM AMONG YOURSELVES.*

- Paul is calling for the exclusion of this immoral brother, which would imply that it meant something to be included in that church
- He would lose the privileges of membership previously given him
- Formal exclusion presupposes formal inclusion
- The result of the church discipline is the removal of the sinner from the congregation
- This implies the presence of a formal membership
- How else could someone be removed if they did not belong in a formal sense in the first place?
- The church is not going to remove someone who does not belong
- The church has jurisdiction over those believers who have committed themselves to that church...So, there appears to be a clear sense of the membership of the church

### **The List of Widows**

**1 Timothy 5:9** ~ *A widow is to be put on the list only if she is not less than sixty years old, having been the wife of one man*

- This verse says that the early church maintained a list of widows
- Those on the list were eligible for financial support
- The fact that a list existed seems to indicate that there was a list of members kept
- It was not just any widow from the city or a widow who came once or twice to the church
- The widows who were put on the list were those widows that were part of that church and had committed themselves to that church
- Those are 5 evidences for formal church membership, so there appear to be numerous places in Scripture that imply that there was a formal church membership in the New Testament
- While none of these examples are overwhelming on their own, taken as a whole they form a substantial argument

- Conclusion: The biblical foundations for church membership permeate the New Testament

## **The Practical Benefit of Church Membership**

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- These are 5 reasons that should compel someone to become a member of a church

### **To Demonstrate Submission to Elders**

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*1 Thessalonians 5:12 ~ But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction*

- Being a member gives you the privilege of being under the leadership of godly, loving elders who want to shepherd and care for those in the church
- It provides the protection of the leaders and puts you under the loving care and guidance of loving shepherds who care for the needs of the flock

*Hebrews 13:17 ~ Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you*

- Being a member allows you to benefit from the watchful eye of those elders who guard and protect the flock
- It identifies you as someone the elders will have to give an account for and it makes them more responsible to you
- It marks you out as one whom the elders are to tend and care for responsibly, and faithfully, and lovingly
- There is spiritual safety when you are cared for and shepherded by loving leaders

### **To Invite Accountability**

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- We can't always read our own souls perfectly...We can deceive ourselves, and we therefore need other people to help us walk as individual Christians
- We need others to hold us accountable and confront us when we go astray
- We need others in our lives who are willing to ask us the hard questions

*Galatians 6:1 ~ Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted*

- We need those who will restore us when we are caught in a trespass
  - Paul is describing a rescue mission...A soldier is down behind enemy lines having been wounded by enemy gunfire...he needs to be rescued
  - He says “gently, cautiously pull this wounded soldier back to safety, watching that you don't get picked-off by the same enemy sniper”
  - The lone soldier, apart from the protection of his platoon, has no chance of survival
  - In the same way, the Christian who is not a committed member of a church removes himself from the protection of the body and has little chance of survival
- That's why you become a member of a church...Your spiritual survival depends on it
  - By becoming a member, you are saying, “I need accountability in my life to keep me pursuing holiness and loving the Lord God with all my heart”

### **To Practice the One-Anothers**

- One of the greatest joys of being a member of a church is that you get to practice and receive the one-anothers

**1 Peter 2:5** ~ *you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*

- The picture of the church here is a building and each individual believer is a living stone in that spiritual house
- Peter's point is that God is building a spiritual house, putting all believers in place, integrating each one with others, and each one with the life of Christ
- It shows how important each individual believer is to the others
- There are no stones that are just thrown together in forming the building...they are cemented together
- That is a great picture of what it means to be a part of the body of Christ
- We are placed together in the body of Christ, the family of God, and the result is close, edifying relationships with each other...Those relationships foster the one another

**Hebrews 10:24-25** ~ *and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.*

**Galatians 6:10** ~ *So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.*

**James 5:16** ~ *Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.*

- We are not made for a life of individuality...We were made to engage in fulfilling the one another with each other...God never intended Christians to function separate from the body

### **To Edify the Body with Spiritual Gifts**

**Romans 12:6-8** ~ *Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.*

- Each person has gifts...gifts that come about because of the Holy Spirit
- And the command: each is to exercise them accordingly

**1 Corinthians 12:7** ~ *But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*

- Each believer has gifts and each person's gifts are needed

**1 Peter 4:10-11** ~ *As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. Whoever speaks, is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.*

- Each of us has gifts that we must employ in ministering to others

- And the issue is stewardship – we are not being good stewards if not using gifts to build up the church and edify the body

### **To Bring God Glory by Displaying Christ to Others**

*Ephesians 3:21 ~ to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.*

- God wants His glory displayed in the church
- Thus, there is a greater cause than each of us individually
- The glory of God is at stake – we want people to know how great our God is
- That’s why you become a member – “I want to be part of the body of Christ so I can be part of that greater cause!”
- This is why becoming a member of a local church is important - It’s an expression of our commitment!
- And those are the things that a believer gives themselves to in becoming a church member
- Some will say...but I can do all those things without becoming a member
- Why is it better to be a member than simply a regular attender?
- To ask: why should I become a member if I can do all those things without formally going through membership, shows a misunderstanding of church membership and possibly a lack of commitment

Church membership should not be viewed as a loose affiliation useful to members only on occasion. This is a self-centered way of looking at membership. It says, "I want to join this club for the benefits that it can offer me...Church membership is not a set of rights that I purchase...It is a set of responsibilities that I commit myself to carrying out, both for and with other members in Gospel fellowship, work, and joy.

9 Marks