

WE AFFIRM THE BIBLICAL MODEL OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

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What we see today is a clear directive from Scripture. Still, for decades, we've been seeing a shift in attitudes in regards both to church attendance and to membership. Some major denominations like Calvary Chapel (which would say that it's not a denomination) purposefully lacks church membership, though they would also say commitment and involvement is important. Many Christians go a step farther and say there's no need to tie oneself down to just one, that we should just go "where the Spirit leads" (whatever that means). Some might still call one church home, but they come only when there's nothing else pressing like soccer games, etc.

Some recent numbers highlight this problem. For instance, the Southern Baptist Convention held their annual conference this last week, and one commission on discipleship noted a troubling statistic.¹ According to the North American Mission Board study, in the past twenty years, the SBC has baptized some 7.1 million people, but there's been membership numbers haven't risen as a result. After calculating for mortality rates, they discovered that, in this case, some 6.5 million have dropped out of SBC churches in the same timeframe. So church membership isn't the only problem; people are leaving through the backdoor as fast as they're entering through the front.

Our current study is a series of sermons that attempt to define the distinctive markers of our church, and we affirm today the responsibility we have as Christians to the local church. What we read is that God indeed calls us to be committed to a local church congregation, to participate in the life of the body of Christ. We can see both a clear precedent and rationale for church membership in His Word. There, we can also see benefits to church membership. Let's start by considering the precedent.

A BIBLICAL PRECEDENT FOR MEMBERSHIP

While the "church" is not in the Old Testament as such, it's profitable to look back and see examples of how God dealt with His people in the past. For instance, we could consider the Garden of Eden itself – while in a relationship with God, His people dwelt in the garden, and when that fellowship was broken by sin, they found themselves on the outside (Gn 2:8; 3:24). Indeed, their reentry was blocked by "the cherubim and the flaming sword" (3:24). While certain moments in history represent a partial restoration as to what man lost in the Garden, including membership in the church, we remain on the *outside* as it were until some of us see full restoration in glory.

Consider the vivid example of the world-wide, catastrophic flood. Jesus explained the harrowing situation (paralleling today) in which everyone simply continued "eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage" – or continued on with their normal lives – "until the day that Noah entered the ark" (Mt 24:38). He goes on to say that "they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away" (v. 25). Noah preached righteousness (2 Pt

¹ Tom Ascol, "Reflections on the 2018 Southern Baptist Convention," June 15, 2018, Founders Ministries (available at www.founders.org/2018/06/15/reflections-on-the-2018-southern-baptist-convention/), accessed on 16 June, 2018).

2:5) to a world about to be destroyed, but the only members of the saved congregation would sadly only be Noah's family – everyone else was lost.

This who's-in-who's-out concept comes with the giving of the Law. Israel came to Sinai and learned that there was to be a division between them and other peoples, affecting everything, including what the congregation of Israel ate (Lv 11). Those inside who were considered ceremonially unclean had to be removed and remain outside the camp (Lv 13:46; Nm 5:3). Certain festivals, including that of atonement for sin, were for members of this congregation (Lv 23). Joshua chapters 14–21 describes the boundaries of land of Israel, and God commanded against intermarrying those on the outside (Dt 7:3).

We can see clear parallels here with the New Testament church, including a specific place of worship (1 Kgs 8). David said, "I will tell of Your name to my brethren; in the midst of the assembly I will praise You" (Ps 22:22). He also said, "I will give You thanks in the great congregation; I will praise You among a mighty throng" (Ps 35:18). He continued to use this congregational language of worship throughout the psalms (cf. Ps. 42:4; 55:14; 100:2–4; 122:1; 132:7; 149:1).

Of course, though this congregation was largely an ethnic one, others could come and *join* to worship the Lord. A "mixed multitude" went from Egypt with Israel (Ex 12:38), and God gives provision for those who want to join Israel and become "like a native of the land" (v. 48). Through Isaiah, the Lord says, "Also the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to Him, and to love the name of the LORD, to be His servants, every one who keeps from profaning the sabbath and holds fast My covenant; even those I will bring to My holy mountain and make them joyful in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on My altar; for My house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples" (Is 56:6–7; quoted by Jesus in Mk 11:17).

All of this talk of Old Testament saints is important for us because 1.) the same God authored all Scripture, which is profitable (cf. 2 Tm 3:16) and 2.) while there are differences between the Old and New, there are also some important similarities. For instance, there remains a temple in which the Holy Spirit resides, a spiritual one, with Christians forming the stones of construction (1 Cor 3:16–17; Eph 2:20–22; 1 Pt 2:5). This church might transcend land and culture, but it still is distinct from the world – Christians are warned not to yoke themselves to unbelievers (2 Cor 6:11), and God says, "Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever" (1 Jn 2:15–17).

As it is in heaven, so it should be on earth. Jesus Himself has built the New Testament church with a visible affirmation that has effects on earth (Mt 16:18–19; Jn 17:21, 23). This affects everything we do as Christians (1 Cor 10:31), just like being a member of Israel affected all of life. Indeed, we even have ceremonies of our own that the Lord has instituted, baptism and the Lord's supper (Mt 18:19; Rm 6:3–4; 1 Cor 11:17–34).

Whether Old or New Testament peoples, the Lord knows who are His (2 Tm 2:19), and Jesus will separate the wheat and the tares (Mt 13:24–30), the sheep and the goats (Mt 25:31–33). Some tares and goats are members of local

congregations, and the Lord knows how to tell the difference. It wouldn't be inaccurate to say, then, that He keeps a membership roll for heaven (Rv 20:15), a universal church transcending time and space, peoples and cultures.

Some might argue that, even with an Old Testament precedent set for membership into the community of God's people, and the similarities we've seen between it and the New, we're still left with the question as to whether the Bible says we should. In fact, based on what we've already said, Christians already have membership where it counts. Further complicating the process is the lack of a direct command for us to join a church; God doesn't directly command, "Join a local assembly." So, you may be left wondering if church membership is an invention of well-meaning but business-minded Western models in the last couple of centuries.

A BIBLICAL RATIONALE FOR CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Christians sometimes tempted to view themselves as mere patrons of services (e.g., customers) – visiting one and then another based on whim and mobility – or choosing not to go when the Sunday morning bed feels too comfortable. In Scripture, we see Christians invested in the work of worship. Corporately, they offered praise to God (Hb 13:5), prayers (1 Tm 2:8), amens (1 Cor 14:16), and music (Col 3:16; Eph 5:19). As a congregation, they received the reading of God's Word (Col 4:16; 1 Thes 5:27; 1 Tm 4:13), the preaching of Scripture (2 Tim. 4:2), and the Lord's Supper (Acts 2:42; 20:7; Cf. 1 Cor. 11:20). If someone is not in church, he cannot with one accord and "with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rm 15:6; cf. Eph. 5:19-21). As such, Christians are not simply members of a heavenly, universal body.

Indeed, they must recognize around them the visible, earthly line of demarcation between those inside and outside the church. They shouldn't judge outsiders but those inside the church (1 Cor 5:12-13), forming a group of people who handle disputes in a Christ-honoring manner (Mt 18:15-20). Another verse speaks of a local church as having a majority involvement in such proceedings (2 Cor 2:6) – which begs the question, if there is no church membership, a *majority* of what? A loose confederation of Christians can't practice the church discipline that the Lord commands, as someone can't be dismissed from a church that he never joined. There must be some means of determining who is who.

Consider this with the church in its infancy in Acts 2. On Pentecost, we read that "there were added about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:41). A few verses later, we read that "the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved" (v. 47). In 4:4, we read, "But many of those who had heard the message believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand." Belief is the point of entry into the universal church, but baptism the entry-point into the local church – which is how the early church knew how many became believers.

Notice that this multitude or congregation had all things in common (Acts 4:32) because "there was not a needy person among them" (v. 34). Christians liquidated property to give to the needy believers, laying money "at the apostles' feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need" (vv. 34-35). An interesting parallel to this comes later in the epistles; while Christians are commanded to do good to everyone, we read "especially to those who are of the household of the faith" (Gal 6:10). Somehow, the early church wasn't just tracking numbers, but the those who were joining and what needs some may have had.

Indeed, while they may not have looked like our membership rolls, they kept lists of some kind. For instance, in 1 Timothy 5:9, Paul gave Timothy specific instructions to make a list of widows needing support. Of course, this is a list related to the membership, not of the entire membership. Still, these are widows that the church knew (Timothy had to distinguish the true widow from the idler), which indicated that these were women who were part of the church.

The early church kept track of church membership because God commands elders to know who is and who isn't in the church. According to Acts 20:28, elders are to be on guard "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." Elders knew who were in churches and could recommend someone to other churches, if need be (cf. Rm 16:1-16).

This is why Christians are commanded to help make the job easier: "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" (Hb 13:17). Christians are not commanded to submit to just any elder, like the false teacher on TBN, but specifically to the elder of their home church.

All this explains why membership has always existed in the early church. For instance, The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus of Rome (ca. AD 215) details what catechumens (or new Christians) underwent before becoming full members of a church—they spent three years learning the Word, followed by prayer and then baptism during the Easter service. While I'm not suggesting that as a model, perhaps churches wouldn't lose millions out the backdoor if we began providing discipleship before they even enter the front door.

That brings us to the final point for today. Like with many of God's other commands, there are benefits to obedience. Let's consider these before we close.

THE BIBLICAL BENEFITS OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

We started by reading a verse with a clear command to be committed to a church. We are to be "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" (Hb 10:25). Notice here that the command leads naturally into a benefit for all involved.

First, we worship God as He has instructed. It's certainly not impossible to worship God *outside* of the church service, but the implication of the second commandment is that we should worship Him as He has prescribed. When biblical worship is followed, even unbelievers recognize the presence of God (cf. 1 Cor 14:23-25). When we are together fulfilling His Word, the love of God is manifested (1 Jn 4:7-12). We're obeying Him when we're a part of a church, and that gives us confidence that our worship is acceptable to Him.

Second, we encourage and edify others. The whole church is involved in building itself up in love (Eph 4:11-16). If you skip out on church, you never know what opportunities you miss in someone else's life. Conversely, if you are feeling down and out, in need of being built up, you cut yourself off from the means of God's grace in your life through your absence. Being filled with the Holy Spirit as a Christian means "be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord;

always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father; and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ” (Eph 5:18–21).

Third, we find assurance of faith in the church. Jesus gave the keys of the kingdom to His disciples, telling them that “whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven” (Mt 16:19; cf. 18:18). MacArthur explains, “The sum of it all means that any duly constituted body of believers, acting in accord with God’s Word, has the authority to declare if someone is forgiven or unforgiven.”² The fact that people are watching over our souls gives us a great assurance of faith, and as the Day of the Lord draws closer, and we are facing our own mortality, we need it.

CONCLUSION

If we recognize the importance of church membership, then maybe we’ll stem the tide of those leaving out the backdoor. Louis Berkhof stated that Reformed theologians had developed up to three marks of a true church – the true preaching of the Word, the right administration of the sacraments, and the faithful exercise of discipline.³ Christians might see the importance of the first, but the other two points solidify the need for membership. Elders can’t baptize just anyone and they must know who they are disciplining. Church membership is as essential to the healthy operation of the church as anything else.

Even so, I don’t just want you to understand this because it’s important for the healthy operation of our church, but because it’s important for your own spiritual health. Proverbs 18:1–2 says, “He who separates himself seeks *his own* desire, he quarrels against all sound wisdom. A fool does not delight in understanding, but only in revealing his own mind.” Some get wrapped up in their own sin, not realizing that they are rationalizing themselves away from the truth. The external symptom of that is seeking isolation.

That means that you need to be in church, regardless of what you think or feel at the moment. Times when you don’t think or feel like you need it are times you need it the most. I’m talking in generalities – of course there might be real issues or concerns to deal with, and we’ll talk about some of that next week. Still, the general principle is that you need to be sitting under the Word of God in a church that seeks to obey God in its operation with the people of God encouraging and being encouraged by you. The longer you are away, the harder it will be to return, but if it’s a good church, you know you have people thinking about and praying for you.

If you are a member of the universal church, then you need to be a member of a local church.

² John MacArthur Jr., ed., [The MacArthur Study Bible](#), electronic ed. (Nashville, TN: Word Pub., 1997), 1423.

³ L. Berkhof, [Systematic Theology](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans publishing co., 1938), 576–578.

Perhaps under church discipline:

Fourth, Paul instructs Christians to leave the judgment of unbelievers to God and to judge those within a church. He says, "For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? But those who are outside, God judges. 'Remove the wicked man from among yourselves.'" (1 Cor 5:12-13). This is a vital passage on church discipline which we will discuss next week, Lord willing. Even so, it leaves us with a difficult problem unless there is church membership – how can you remove the wicked man if there is no defined "among yourselves"? All through 1 Corinthians 5:4-13, we see some *in* the church who need to be put *out* of it.