

How important is church membership?

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Five Strands of Evidence

I will point to five strands in the New Testament of evidence for church membership. Each of these reveals something in the New Testament which would be minimized or denied if there were no definable local church membership.

1) The Church Is to Discipline Its Members

Church membership is implied by the way the church is supposed to discipline its members. Consider the implication of Matthew 18:15-17 where "the church" (*ekklesia*) appears to be the final court of appeal in matters of church authority as it relates to membership.

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. *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.

If there is no church membership, how can you define the group that will take up this sensitive and weighty matter of exhorting the unrepentant person and finally rendering a judgment about his standing in the community? It's hard to believe that just anyone who showed up claiming to be a Christian could be a part of that gathering. Surely, "the church" must be a definable group to handle such a weighty matter. You know who you mean when you "take it to the church."

2) Excommunication Exists

Church membership is implied by the simple fact that excommunication even exists. Paul implies this in 1 Corinthians 5:12-13 where he deals with the necessity of putting someone out of the church. He says, "What have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. 'Purge the evil person from among you.'"

There are two implications here: One is that there is an "in the church" group and an "outside the church" group. Being in the church is definable. The other implication is that a person can be removed from being "in the church." Such a formal *removal* would not be possible if there were no such thing as a clear membership—who is an accountable part of this body, and who is not?

3) Christians Required to Submit to Their Leaders

Church membership is implied in the biblical requirement of Christians to be submitted to a group of church leaders, elders, or pastors. The point here is that without membership, who is it that the New Testament is referring to who must submit to a specific group of leaders? Some kind of expressed willingness or covenant or agreement or commitment (that is, membership) has to precede a person's submission to a group of leaders.

Consider the way the New Testament talks about the relationship of the church to her leaders.

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. (Hebrews 13:17)

We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you (proistamenous humon) in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13)

Let the elders who rule well (hoi kalos proestotes presbuteroi) be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. (1 Timothy 5:17)

How is this leadership and this submission going to work if there is no membership defining who has made the commitment to be led and who has been chosen as leaders? If we downplay the importance of membership, it is difficult to see how we could take these commands to submit and to lead seriously and practically.

4) Shepherds Required to Care for Their Flock

Church membership is implied in the way the New Testament requires elders to care for the flock in their charge. Of course elders can extend their love

to anyone and everyone, and should, within the limits of their ability. But the question is whether the Bible tells elders that they are to have a special responsibility and care for a certain group—a group of members. Consider Acts 20:28 where Paul tells the elders how to care for their flock.

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all *the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers*, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

This verse does not say elders cannot visit unbelievers or those who are not yet members. But it does make clear that their first responsibility is to a particular flock. How are they to know who their flock is? Who are we as elders and pastors responsible for? For whom will we give an account to God?

The way Peter speaks to the elders in 1 Peter 5 is even more clear on this point. Verses 2-3: "Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over *those in your charge* (*tov kleron*), but being examples to the flock."

"Those in your charge" (your portion, your lot) implies that the elders knew whom they were responsible for. This is just another way of talking about membership. If a person does not want to be held accountable by a group of elders or be the special focus of the care of a group of elders, they will resist the idea of membership. And they will resist God's appointed way for them to live and be sustained in their faith.

5) The Metaphor of the Body

Church membership is implied in the metaphor of the *body* in 1 Corinthians 12:12-31. The original meaning of the word *member* is member of a body, like hand and foot and eye and ear. That's the imagery behind the word *member* in the text. Verse 12: "Just as the body is one and has many *members*, and all the *members* of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ."

So the question this imagery raises for the local church that Paul is describing in 1 Corinthians 12 is: Who intends to be treated as a hand or foot or eye or ear of this body? There is a unity and organic relationship

implied in the imagery of the body. There is something unnatural about a Christian attaching himself to a body of believers and not being a member of the body.

Expectation for All Believers

So for these five reasons and more we believe that membership is a New Testament expectation for all believers. Each of us should be a member of a local body of believers.

- We should take responsibility to discipline those of the body who do not repent from public sin that brings reproach on the name of Christ.
- We should declare ourselves part of the body so that if we are wayward, we ourselves would be liable to such exclusion.
- We should take our position under the leadership and authority of a particular group of elders.
- We should declare ourselves part of a group who expect to be watched over and cared for by a particular group of elders.
- And we should find our place in the organic whole as a body part—a member—of a local body of Christ.

That is *God's* plan for us and for this church. That's what we mean by *membership*. All of those aspects of membership are rooted in the truth that the local church is an expression of the universal church. Part of what it means to belong to *the* body of Christ is to belong to *a* body.

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