

The Meaning of Church Membership and Accountability

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Is Church Membership Taught in the New Testament?

Membership in a local church involves commitment to worship the Lord corporately, edifying brothers and sisters through mutual exhortation and service, cooperating in mission, and holding each other accountable to walk in a manner pleasing to the Lord as a witness to the truth of Christ in the world.

We believe that covenant church membership is a wise and helpful path for those who desire to walk together in obedience to the Lord and in a manner that is worthy of the gospel of Christ.¹ This becomes evident when we consider how the New Testament teaching on church government and church discipline relate to mutual accountability and thus to the concept of covenant membership. The New Testament teaching about church government and church discipline would be meaningless if some form of commitment to mutual accountability in a body of believers were not expected.

Church Government Implies a Membership of Accountability

The New Testament teaches that the local church has elders or overseers who have special responsibility to equip² and care for³ and teach⁴ the members. The New Testament teaches that the members are to respect⁵ and be submissive to⁶ these leaders, but not to treat them as infallible⁷ or in the place of Christ.⁸ They are servants, not masters,⁹ and their leadership comes from their divine call to serve,¹⁰ not from their desire to rule. Their leadership does not replace the congregation of believers as the body with final authority under the Lord.¹¹

This whole picture of called leaders, and people who affirm that leadership, assumes the existence of “church membership” that consists in a corporate life of mutual

¹ Philippians 1:27

² Ephesians 4:11

³ Acts 20:28

⁴ I Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:9

⁵ I Thessalonians 5:12

⁶ Hebrews 13:17

⁷ I Timothy 5:20

⁸ Matthew 23:8-12

⁹ Luke 22:26

¹⁰ Acts 20:28

¹¹ Matthew 18:17; I Corinthians 5:4; Acts 6:3, 15:22

accountability. Leadership and submission have no meaning where there is no commitment to accountability (that is, to membership).

Church Discipline Implies a Membership of Accountability

Jesus said, “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 word may be confirmed 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”.¹²

What this implies is that Christians are to be members of churches where they are held accountable to walk in a way that pleases the Lord. If there were no relationship of accountability, it would be meaningless to “tell it to the church,” because the offending person would simply say, “That church has no jurisdiction over me.”

The same thing is implied in 1 Corinthians 5. A man in the church is living in blatant immorality and is proudly unrepentant.¹³ Paul writes, “Let him who has done this be removed from among you”.¹⁴ He goes on to say, “When you are assembled . . . you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus”.¹⁵

None of this would be feasible if the immoral man could simply say, “I am not accountable to you. I can do what I please. You have no authority or rights over me.” In other words, the teaching of the New Testament on church discipline implies that church membership (involving mutual accountability among the members) is the will of God for all Christians.

The Church Covenant

The biblical call for a membership of mutual accountability in a local body of believers suggests the need for believers to make a covenant with one another. This is simply implied in agreeing to hold each other accountable to walk in a manner pleasing to the Lord.

The church covenant is a written summary of biblical practice that a church agrees should be the basis of its accountability. The covenant allows for freedom of conscience

¹² Matthew 18:15-17

¹³ I Corinthians 5:2

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ I Corinthians 5:4-5

in areas where the Bible is not definite in its guidance. The covenant focuses on principles, especially as they relate to our corporate life together.

The church commitment for Parkside Bible Church is:

- We commit to have others minister to us and be involved in our spiritual growth, and to do the same for those in our individual and church family.
- We commit to finding a way to exercise our spiritual gifts and use them in such a way as to build up the body of Christ.
- We commit to living a life of mission and mercy where we seek to engage the lost and hurting and pray for opportunities to talk about our faith and love for Jesus as well as minister to them in the name of Jesus.
- We commit to giving of our time, talent, and treasure to further the mission and work of Jesus at Parkside.
- We commit to submit and follow the leadership of Parkside as those leaders seek to follow Jesus.