

Church Membership

Various Scriptures

Introduction: Many people make the mistake of noting the absence of modern forms of Church Membership in the New Testament and then concluding that membership is the teaching of man rather than the Scriptures. Such belief not only fails to use proper biblical interpretation but also often fails even to recognize the formal agreements hinted at and mentioned in the New Testament.

Every Christian should be a member of a Bible-believing (and Bible-teaching) church.

I. Church Membership was practiced in the New Testament

Note: While each of these examples alone might not prove the point, together they provide much support for the modern view of church membership.

- A. **Acts 5:12-13** And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people. And they were all with one accord in Solomon's Porch. 13 Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly. (see also Acts 2:41, 47 where they “were together” and some “were added to their number.”)
1. Those who did not dare join them were fearful that the same fate fall would befall them.
 2. The word “join” implies more than simply showing up.
- B. 1 Timothy 5:9-12 – “Do not let a widow under sixty years old be taken into the number, and not unless she has been the wife of one man...”
1. The word for “taken into number” (often translated “enrolled”) can be specific, in the sense of putting someone on a list, or it can be general, in the sense of being considered as part of a certain group.
 2. Either understanding implies more than mere attendance.
 3. Why would the church at Ephesus keep a list of widows but not a list of members?
- C. 2 Corinthians 2:6 – “This punishment which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man,”
1. The existence of a majority that imposed the punishment on this man implies that there was in existence “a defined set of people from which the majority [was] constituted” (Mike McKinley).
 2. The most reasonable conclusion is that this majority was comprised of people who were members of the church.

- D. *Conclusion*: “Among other pieces of evidence, these three examples suggest that participation in the life of the church body wasn’t casual or easily dissolved. It was a relationship that one entered into (joined) and that came with responsibilities (determining punishment) and privileges (support for the widows). It is hard to imagine how this was accomplished without a clear sense of the membership of the church.”

II. Church Membership is taught by Scripture

Note: While the Scripture does not expressly set down a command for church membership (as we practice it today), such a practice is consistent with the biblical principles as demonstrated by these three examples.

- A. Paul’s teaching regarding Church Discipline necessarily implies membership (1 Cor.5:1-12).
1. In v. 2, removing the man “away from among” them implies some type of formal membership. Otherwise, how can one be removed?
 2. In v. 4, the removing is to be done when they are “gathered together.” This implies not only that there was a definite and formal assembly of the church, but also that the church knew who to expect and who not to expect.
 3. In v. 12, Paul makes clear that such discipline may be applied only to those who are “inside” the church. This makes clear that there were distinctions between who was an insider and who was an outsider.
- B. The NT’s teaching of the Church’s accountability to her leaders implies membership (Acts 20:28; Hebrews 13:17).
1. In Acts 20:28, Paul tells the Ephesian elders to “take heed to yourselves and to all the flock.” Their flock was not anyone who showed up or everyone in the city, there was a recognized constituency to this flock for whom the elders would give account.
 2. In Hebrews 13:17, the church is to respect their elders because “they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account.” For whom do they watch out and give an account, certainly not all people in the community indiscriminately, for how would they accomplish such a task?
 3. These examples place upon the elders and leaders of the church a responsibility that is meaningless and impossible without some understanding of formal church membership.
- C. The NT metaphors for the Church imply membership.

1. Acts 20:28 refers to the church as a “flock”; 1 Cor. 12:12 compares the church to a “body”; while 1 Peter 2:5 pictures the church as a “building.”
2. The point of each of these metaphors is the relationship between the members and the whole.
3. Each of these metaphors implies more than a casual commitment to the whole. We best reflect the meaning of these metaphors when we seek formal membership in a body.

III. Without a proper understanding of church membership you cannot keep most of the commandments of Scripture.

- A. The commands to honor the elders are difficult to obey apart from the context of church involvement/membership (Heb. 13:17; Gal. 6:6; 1 The. 5:12-13; 1 Tim. 5:17).
 1. **Hebrews 13:17** Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.
 2. **Galatians 6:6** Let him who is taught the word share in all good things with him who teaches.
 3. **1 Thessalonians 5:12-13** And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, ¹³ and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. Be at peace among yourselves.
 4. **1 Timothy 5:17** Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine.
- B. One cannot obey the “one another” commands of Scripture apart from a church context. Some examples:
 1. **Galatians 6:2** Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.
 2. **Ephesians 4:2** with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love,
 3. **James 4:11** Do not speak evil of one another, brethren. He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge.
 4. **James 5:9** Do not grumble against one another, brethren, lest you be condemned. Behold, the Judge is standing at the door!

5. **James 5:16** Confess *your* trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.
 6. **1 John 1:7** But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.
- C. The discussion of spiritual gifts in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 take place within the context of the local church (not some universal, invisible group).
 - D. There are many opportunities for service and ministry (and thus faithfulness and obedience to the Scriptures) within a church context; more so than without it.

IV. Some additional thoughts on church membership:

- A. Church membership is an identifier (see previous verses under I.)
 1. An identifier of commitment
 2. An identifier of doctrine
 3. An identifier of ministry involvement
- B. Orderliness is necessary for the church to function properly (1 Cor. 14:40) and membership makes it easier for the church to function in an orderly manner.

V. The proper understanding of Church Membership is essential to the health of the body and the individual believer

- A. Because the Scriptures reveal it.
- B. Because the believer needs the church's care.
- C. Because the believer needs accountability.
- D. Because the believer is commanded to care for and to edify ("build up") build up the church (1 Thess 5:11).
- E. Because other commandments and necessities such as evangelism, discipleship, etc., are revealed in Scripture as taking place in the context of the local church.

Conclusion: Church membership is a vital commitment for the church and the believer. The believer needs the fellowship and authority of a local church, while the church needs the sustained commitment of believers to function and to carry out her role in the world.

What should I do as a church member?

1. *Attend worship services faithfully.* Without attending faithfully, you can't be edified, not can you edify others.
2. *Attend Lord's Supper services especially.* The observance of the Lord's Supper is not only a perpetually binding ordinance; it serves to binds us together in unity.
3. *Attend member's meetings.* Each member should care enough about the church to know what is going on.
4. *Pray regularly.* The most basic and yet overlooked way to serve the church is to pray for one another.
5. *Give regularly.* If you don't give, the pastor won't be free to devote himself to ministry, the church's outreach will shrink and stop, the missionaries will have to come home, and the lights will be turned off.

How Membership is sought in Zion Baptist Church (and similar churches)

1. By *Profession of Faith and Baptism* if you have trusted Christ by repenting of your sin and believing in him for salvation.
2. By *Church Letter* if you are currently a member of a Baptist Church (you do not need to get your letter; church letters are passed from church to church).
3. By *Statement* if you have trusted Christ and been baptized by immersion in a Baptist church at some time.
4. By *Baptism* if you are coming from another denomination but have been saved by trusting in Christ alone.

Sources:

Mark Dever. *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*. Crossway, 2004.

Raju Kunjummen, Unpublished Class Notes to 404 Ecclesiology / Eschatology. Plymouth: Michigan Theological Seminary, 2007.

J. L. Dagg. *Manual of Church Order*.