

An Encouragement to Church Membership

Ephesians 1:22-23

Summary: “We are members of one another,” Eph 4:25. That is a **reality**. But we must learn to live **as** members of one another rather than apart from one another or at odds with one another.

The idea of church membership is most simply a definitive recognition of the particular body of believers with whom we are seeking to *live out* our mutual membership in Christ. The formalities of church membership may take different forms, but it is basically only the affirmation, “I’m with this body of saints.”

I. Church Membership is an Encouraging Doctrine

- A. Church membership, from its widest sense down to its narrowest sense, is there for our good.
- B. Any message on it should increase our awareness of our bond with the brothers and sisters in a particular assembly, thus strengthening our love and commitment.

Kid-speak: What are we talking about today? Church membership.

II. Church Membership Has Four “Levels”: Christians are Members:

- A. With/of Christ, Rom 6:3;
 - 1. This is the widest sense of church membership.
 - 2. But it informs all the other aspects.
- B. of Christ *together with* the saints in Heaven, Heb 12:23;
- C. *With* all saints on earth, Gal 3:28;
- D. *With* a specific local body of believers, 1 Cor 16:1.
- E. See the Philadelphia Confession of 1742, Chapter 27, Of the Church (Attached).

Kid-speak: If we are members of **Christ**, what does that mean? We belong to Him and we are part of Him!

III. Church *Membership* Rests on the Reality of the Church Itself

- A. The Church is established by Christ's authority, Matt 16:18.
- B. Christ gives rules of order for His church on earth, 1 Tim 3:15.
- C. This order can only be exercised in the context of local churches (including interrelations between local churches), Rev 2:11.
- D. Local churches only exist if there are recognized bodies of Christians, dwelling together by mutual consent under Christ.
 1. The phrase "one another" in Eph 4:25 (opening Summary) must have application to specific Christians to be meaningful.
 2. The phrase "**one another**" in general indicates a particular body of believers relating to one another in prescribed ways.
 - a. Rom 12:10 (honoring); 1 Cor 12:25 (caring); 2 Cor 13:12 (holy kiss); Gal 6:2 (bearing burdens); Philip 2:3 (counting as better); Col 3:13 (bearing with);
 - b. 1 Thess 4:9 (loving); 1 Pet 4:9 (hospitality); 1 Jn 1:7 (fellowship)
 3. Again, this does not limit our brotherly duties to a local assembly, but how is it possible that they would not be foremost?

Kid-speak: What is the church? The church is all the people in the world and in Heaven who love Jesus. What is a **local church**? A group of Christians who meet together and try to follow Jesus together.

IV. The Term "Church Membership" Usually Refers to an Official, Mutual Commitment of Believers in a Given Locale: a Local Church

- A. This Fellowship does not erase ties with other Christians and churches.
- B. It merely recognizes the need for a Christian to commit to seeking God together with a *specific group* of Christians:
 1. A commitment which might become the most necessary only when it is most greatly challenged; that is, it is partly (possibly largely) 'insurance' future contingencies.
 2. Church membership foresees difficulties in which loose ties between Christians will invite abandonment.
 - a. Specific, official ties will still be tested to the max, Matt 24:10.
 - b. Without specific, official ties, how can we pass those tests?

Kid-speak: What does church membership mean? It means we have decided to follow Jesus **together**.

V. Church Membership is Implied in These Biblical Realities:

A. In the Church Being Called a Body:

1. 1 Cor 12 says the Church is a body with various parts.
2. Body parts, by definition, work together *by* interconnection.
3. The specific manifestation of this interconnection is what we call church membership.

B. Is implied in Christ's/ the Spirit's Apportionment of Gifts:

1. Gifts are assumed to be exercised in a body context, 1 Cor 12
2. One person's gift complementing another person's gift implies official, longstanding ties between believers; i.e., church membership.

C. Is implied in the Leadership Offices of the Church:

1. Pastor-teachers are shepherds.
 - a. Shepherds of necessity number their flocks to keep track of them.
 - b. Shepherds will only know to retrieve the wayward if they were in his 'count.'
2. Christians are told to yield to their leaders, Heb 13:17. They cannot do this unless they have recognized a specific leader or group of leaders over a specific flock.

D. Church membership is implied by excommunication:

1. How can an unrepentant Christian be ostracized *from* church members unless there was a recognized body *of* church members to begin with? Rom 16:17
2. How can church discipline work unless a body of believers is acting in one accord, having committed to a common goal as members with one another?

Kid-speak: Does every Christian need to be part of one, particular group of Christians? Yes.

VI. The Basics of Church Membership

A. Christ has appointed LEADERS in His churches.

1. They are focal points in church membership.
2. Members must know who leaders are and agree that they are qualified to lead.

- B. Leaders must Biblically define the *leaders'* duties to the people.
 - 1. Leaders are church members with regular member duties *and* leadership duties.
 - 2. In church membership, leaders commit themselves to leading each individual or family in the church.
- C. Leaders must also Biblically define the duties of *church members*.
 - 1. Members agree to be held accountable by leaders to Biblical holiness.
 - 2. This accountability is still by consent, and is defined as the opposite of bullying, 1 Pet 5:.
 - 3. This accountability mainly comes into play should the member stray.
- D. Members accepted into a body are being accepted *by* the existing body,
 - 1. who agree to mutual accountability with the new member,
 - 2. the new member accepting the mutual responsibility as well.
- E. A teaching elder's (1 Tim 5:17) main responsibility is to bring the whole flock under Christ's oversight by preaching and teaching God's Word, especially per the 2 Tim 4:2 definition.
 - 1. The aim is for Christ to lead His flock, which can only occur when His sheep hear His voice, Jn 10:27. His voice is in Scriptures.
 - 2. A teaching elder can best tune both his and his congregation's ears to Jesus' voice by coming to Scriptures with intentionality in that regard.
 - a. The more attention that is paid to the Word, in its *details*, their *interconnections*, and their *broader implications*, the 'closer' we're putting our ears to Jesus' speaking lips.
 - b. Our further goal in hearing Christ as *individuals* is to hear Him together as His *church*.

Kid-speak: What does a church leader do in church membership? He asks somebody, or a family, "Do you want me to teach you what Jesus says so we can follow Him together?"

VII. The Benefits of Church Membership

- A. All the elements of church membership discussed above are intended by God for our good. Church membership is **beneficial**.
- B. Church membership is a choice of love.
 - 1. Members are choosing to dwell together in love, Eph 4:16.

2. The firm commitment of church membership heightens that love (though testing it).
- C. Church membership assures help from others where *I* am weak.
1. And offers *my* help for any who need it.
 2. Back to the body analogy.

Kid-speak: When we become church members, what are we saying to the other church members? We're saying, "I love you and want to listen to Jesus and follow Him *with you.*"

VIII. The Form of Church Membership

- A. There is no fixed form for the process and elements of becoming a church member.
1. Not every church will have the same requirements for church membership.
 2. Some churches may incorporate more specifics in the membership agreement.
- B. But it is hard to imagine a process of church membership that does not involve the crossing of a line from being a non-member to being a member.
1. All that is essentially being said is that a member accepts that:
 - a. this is a legitimate body of believers under Christ
 - b. with whom he wishes to participate;
 - c. (Can someone be a member *in effect*, without a formal process of inclusion?)
 2. that he recognizes the leadership structure and any specific leaders in the church;
 3. that he commits to dwelling together in truth and love with the assembly's other members.
- C. Our own process of church membership involves a prospective member's:
1. agreement with the church statement of faith;
 2. meeting with the pastor (and other leaders) to discuss the eleven individual particulars in the statement of faith;
 3. publicly announcing the new member's participation.
- D. A good, basic formulation of church membership would involve this two-part commitment, initiated *by* the leadership *to* the prospective member:
1. Do you want me to try to retrieve you if you go astray?
 2. I commit to watching over your soul under Christ's lordship.

Kid-speak: What is one thing a church member wants from a church leader? To come and straighten him up if he starts messing up.

E. Part of a local assembly's membership mentality should also include the nature of their assembly's ties with other assemblies.

1. Affiliation with a broader group *or* with specific other churches is, at the least, a final resort when sources within the church have been exhausted or have reached an impasse.
2. But fellowship with other bodies of believers, at least by representatives, is a generally useful tool of sanctification that ought not to be neglected.

Vision: "An Encouragement to Church Membership" is mostly saying, "*Let's be* members with one another, *as* we are with Christ. Let's carry out our oneness in Christ as a family." It's an encouragement to be involved in one another's lives.

Official church membership is sort of like marriage. It's saying, "I'm going to stick with this one," meaning this church body. But it is a voluntary association. Also, a significant change in location will necessitate membership with a new body of saints. But that change itself reaffirms the necessity of church membership: a specific commitment to a specific local church.