

CHURCH SERIES – MEMBERSHIP

“What is a Church Member?” (Hebrews 13:7, 17)

It is popular today in our age of self-reliance and rugged individualism for professing Christians to reject the concept of Church membership. Although Scripture does not contain an explicit command to formally join a local church, it is inferred and assumed throughout. **There are no examples of NT Christians in the Bible that lived separate from the local church.**

A person is blessed to the degree that he or she obeys God’s Word, “*Blessed are they that keep His testimonies, and that seek Him with the whole heart*” (Psa. 119:2). John Calvin warns, “So highly does the Lord esteem the communion of His church, that He considers everyone a traitor and apostate from religion who perversely withdraws himself from any Christian society which preserves the true ministry of the word and sacraments.”

Many argue that membership is redundant as we are “under grace” or that they find no need for such a commitment in the NT. Such people view church as an “ecclesiological buffet” that they can pick and choose what suits them. They consume rather than commit to a local church. But such an attitude undermines the principles of NT Christianity for spiritual growth and leadership. The one who suffers the most from rejecting church membership is the individual in question, as he or she is cut off from the many blessings and opportunities that flow from a membership commitment.

The root problem for most of these “unattached” professing Christians is either ignorance or a lack of commitment. The saints of the past were men and women who were fully committed to the church and its creeds. Many died for this privilege. Membership is not some token acknowledgment that a person has a tenuous connection with a church. We take solemn vows to indicate the depth of this relationship through Christ to one another. The increasing lack of commitment in this area is a poor testimony to the unsaved world. Stephen Pribble notes,

Since the church itself is held in such low regard today, little wonder church membership is not highly regarded. Many civic organizations or professional associations have much higher requirements for membership than the church. In how many local civic clubs could you remain a member in good standing while never attending or paying dues? That civic organizations should have higher standards of membership than the church of Jesus Christ is truly a shame.

WHY SHOULD WE BE CHURCH MEMBERS?

Every believer is part of the invisible church of the body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 12:13). But every saint should seek to identify publicly with the visible church. Church membership is not man’s idea but God’s plan for Christians. Therefore, membership matters. The Bible established the visible church as a distinct entity that God works through. All the apostles did their ministry through it. Even the Greek word for church, *ekklesia* (from two Greek words *ek* meaning “out” and *klesis* meaning “a calling”) implies that there is a visible group of distinguished called out ones from the world.

In the book of Acts at the foundation of the NT church, we find new Christians immediately identifying with the visible community of the called out believers, “*Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.*”

(Acts 2:41). This unity was not temporal but “*And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers*” (v42) and “*And all that believed were together*” (v44a) and “*they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple*” (v46a). These people identified publicly with one another. They co-laboured and shared resources to assist the work of the church. Their obligations to one another were more than superficial. They did not simply practice their faith in isolation or privately. The Lord brought other new converts into their midst to identify with them, “*And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.*” (v48) The membership number was formally tracked and recorded.

So church membership is a public declaration that we identify with the people of God to the world under common and defined doctrinal parameters. It reveals to the unsaved world that you belong to a different kingdom of persons with different values (cf. Matt. 5:13; John 13:34-35; Eph. 3:10; 1 Pet. 2:9-12). It also implies that we recognise that we are part of an interdependent body, which we serve in and submit to the authority within. Membership is recognition that we are not autonomous from other believers and that we are distinct from the unsaved world around us. The New Testament instructions about church government and church discipline would be redundant and foolish if there does not exist a formal commitment to church membership in local congregations.

Believers from the earliest days belonged to visible local churches. The first new converts in Acts acted quickly to join the church (cf. Acts 5:14; 16:5). Much of the language of the NT is only consistent with an organized formal membership structure e.g. “*the church which was at Jerusalem*” (Acts 8:1), “*elders in every church*” (Acts 14:23), “*the whole church*” (Acts 15:22) etc. Whenever a Christian travelled from one geographical area to another, they often brought letters of commendation to new churches (cf. Acts 18:27; Rom. 16:1; Col. 4:10; 2 Cor. 3:1-2). Presbyterian minister, Ricky Jones points out,

Every letter in the New Testament assumes Christians are members of local churches. The letters themselves are addressed to local churches. They teach us how to get along with other members, how to encourage the weak within the church, how to conduct ourselves at church, and what to do with unrepentant sinners in the church. They command us to submit to our elders, and encourage us to go to our elders to pray. All these things are impossible if you aren't a member of a local church.

We today should aspire to do the same. There is not a hint in the NT that believers are to be free-floating, autonomous entities distinct from the other members of the visible church. That is not shepherding and not submitting to those placed over you in the Lord, “*Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves*” (Heb. 13:17).

PURPOSES OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

There are a number of valuable and divinely ordained purposes of church membership:

(1) It enables us to embody and experience biblical metaphors such as the “*body of Christ*,” (Eph. 4:12), the “*the temple of the living God*,” (2 Cor. 6:16), “*fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God*” (Eph. 2:19), “*a spiritual house, an holy priesthood*” (1 Peter 2:5) etc. Paul writes to the Romans, “*For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another*” (Rom. 12:4-5).

So the images used to describe believers particularly emphasizes how interdependent, accountable, and committed they are to one another. We have different functions but one uniting purpose as one body in Christ. Every true saint of God has a divinely ordained duty to serve the needs of others in the Body of Christ. This involves the blending of spiritual gifts by personal stewardship of time, talent, and treasure. Membership has its privileges, but it also has its obligations.

The church is like a body and we are like individual body parts. As we function this way we bring glory to God (1 Pet. 4:10-11). When one member of the body is hurt, the rest of the body works to assist and restore it. We bear one another's burdens (cf. Gal. 6:2). However, any member, like the hand, that is detached from the body quickly withers and dies. This weakens the entire body. A church would be unbalanced if it was filled with Apostle Pauls and there was no Barnabas there! We are all needed, as feet cannot be hands and vice versa.

(2) To enjoy support and fellowship with other believers. Christianity is not a religion to be practiced in isolation. God created us to be in fellowship with one another. We are explicitly commanded,

And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching. (Heb. 10:24-25)

This word "*forsaking*" means "desertion" or "abandoning when you should be helping." This is how the Bible views those who carelessly treat attendance in the Church on the Lord's Day. It was clear that even in Paul's day there were professing Christians who often were absent from worship in their local assembly as he says, "*as the manner of some is.*"

Paul uses the present continuous tense here for the verb "*exhorting*" as this call for encouragement is to be the believer's continual practice. The saints of God are in a daily battle with the world, the flesh, and the devil. There is no shortage of spiritual, physical, and emotional needs in a local church. Often we get on our own nerves! Many people fail because of lack of encouragement. The world is constantly pressuring Christians to conform to its values. So we need the fellowship of the saints on the Lord's Day for fellowship, discipleship, prayer, encouragement, support, worship, united evangelism. We even need each other for needful correction and redirection.

(3) It makes us accountable to others in the Body of Christ (cf. Heb. 13:7; 17). Failure to formally become a member of a local assembly of saints effectively defies the explicit command to submit to church leaders in ruling authority. Even the apostles ensured they were under authority and submitted to the accountability of one another. Paul famously rebuked Peter to his face for his sin. Although Paul received his commission to take the gospel to the Gentiles directly from the Lord (cf. Gal.1:11-12), Paul always made himself accountable to the church,

And thence sailed to Antioch, from whence they had been recommended to the grace of God for the work which they fulfilled. And when they were come, and had gathered the church together, they rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles. (Acts 14:26-27)

Then fourteen years after I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and took Titus with me also. And I went up by revelation, and communicated unto them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to them which were of reputation, lest by any means I should run, or had run, in vain. (Gal. 2:1-2)

When we join a church we are implicitly ensuring that we are to be encouraged, rebuked, corrected, and served by others. It disciplines us to commit to attendance, service, prayer, giving, participating in the ordinances etc. in at least one place. This requires a distinguishable and mutually understood membership in a local church. Leadership and submission have no meaning where there is no commitment to accountability in terms of formal membership. Membership logically follows as:

(a) You can never be *excommunicated* under the powers described in Matthew 18:15-20 (cf. 1 Cor. 5:13; 10-11; Titus 3:10) if you had never been a *communicant* member to begin with! A person cannot be put out of a local church that he has never joined! Indeed, if a church leadership issues charges or an order of excommunication against an attendee in such circumstances, the person can merely dismiss it as irrelevant as the church has no formal jurisdiction over him or her.

(b) You can never submit to leaders and they have no power to rule over you unless you are a member (cf. 1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 5:17). Paul commands members to view leaders highly, “*esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake*” (1 Thess. 5:13). How can you esteem those who are ruling over you if you do not recognize anyone in authority over you? If you reject all church membership, then do you submit to anyone with the title “elder” from any church? A shepherd is redundant if the sheep won’t submit to his authority. The best he can do is to merely advise you. John MacArthur points out,

The question for each believer is, “Who are your leaders?” The one who has refused to join a local church and entrust himself to the care and the authority of the elders has no leaders. For that person, obedience to Hebrews 13:17 is impossible. To put it simply, this verse implies that every believer knows to whom he must submit, which, in turn, assumes clearly defined church membership.

Also, pastors/elders are not responsible to oversee, teach, equip, and shepherd every believer in an area or every person who passes through the doors of the local church occasionally. They cannot shepherd a flock that they do not have a formal record of who exactly they are!

It is interesting that the early church members were part of an organized ecclesiastical structure. It is in the church that we learn and are led. The very first theological dispute was resolved through a Presbyterian synod/council in Acts 15 and its conclusions formally ratified and then mandated on those within the organized membership of local congregations,

And as they went through the cities, they delivered them the decrees for to keep, that were ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem. (Acts 16:4)

This process would be illogical if there were no formal membership structure. For how can the commands of the synods be enforced on believers in other congregations if there is no formal link between them! The structures for church governance and discipline assume and logically require that there must be a formal, distinguishable church membership. The NT picture of ordained leaders and members can only function in a corporate life of mutual accountability.

(4) The election of church leaders is clearly set forth in the NT (cf. Acts 6:3; 14:23). Church membership enables believers to participate in the election of church leaders in any local congregation. That is a privilege and a solemn responsibility, as leaders play a vital role in the spiritual lives of many others. A contentious, carnal, and compromising leader is a danger. He can advance or retard a congregation's spiritual health. The choosing of church leaders is not something that should be done lightly or hastily. They must have the spiritual qualifications listed in 1 Timothy 3:1-13, Titus 1:5-9, and Acts 6:2-6. The church will only be strong with godly leaders and godly members.

CONCLUSION

A local church is great not because of its building or numbers attending but because of the commitment of its members to walk together in the steps of their Great Lord. When some neglect to make this commitment, then the whole body of Christ is weakened. If there is no local congregation that has the essential marks of a true church, then prayerfully move to where you can find one. It is remarkable that people can quickly move homes and countries for education and career advancement but not for spiritual edification!

Believers are not to wander from church to church every week in a kind of "church hopping" exercise. This is completely at odds with the pattern and principles of NT Christianity. Christians are called to commit themselves to serving and submitting to a local assembly of believers. Paradoxically, many will commit themselves to country clubs and companies but not to a church. Yet the church is the most vital organization on earth. John MacArthur questions,

But if individually we are identified with Christ, why then do so many Christians refuse to identify with the church—a collection of others likewise identified with the Savior? Why do they refuse church membership and eschew fellowship with a local congregation? If the Lord has made us all one family in eternity, why do so many believers spend so much time here on earth avoiding one another?

There is no loophole here. It is not a matter of mere personal preference. The Bible is unequivocal. We must all submit to the great Shepherd, Christ and those whom Christ has appointed to lead His true church as His undershepherds. God's design for every professing Christian is to co-labour in mutual accountability and dependence in the local church body with other self-sacrificing believers to carry out God's great purposes in the church and the world. None of us can make it alone. We all need each other. This begins by identifying formally through church membership. God will bless you if you do.