

Members Of Christ And Members Of One Another

Why Church Membership Is Biblical And Why It Matters

“So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.”¹ With these words, the apostle Paul began a series of instructions to Christians in how they relate to others in the church. Notice that he calls us “one body in Christ” and “members of one another.” Today, some Christians have a hard time with the concept of church membership. Is it necessary? Is it helpful? Is it even biblical? There is a growing trend among Christians to simply attend a church without joining it and there are even churches that are dropping the concept of membership altogether. What should we think of church membership?

There is no one verse that states, “Thou shalt sign a church covenant, agree to articles of faith, and have your name on a church membership role.” So, many people think that membership is unnecessary at best and unbiblical at worst. Of course, there isn’t one verse that tells us all of what to expect in the end times, how the Trinity relates to one another, or all the details of how God created the world. Most biblical teachings are not a single verse but are seen by looking at the Bible as a whole and establishing patterns, practices, and principles that, when compared with each other, create a bigger picture. So, did New Testament churches practice membership? Yes! This is gleaned from several lines of evidence.

1. All Christians Are Members Of The Body Of Christ, Often Called The Universal Church.

When we believe the Gospel, the Holy Spirit indwells us to unite us to Christ. Paul wrote, in 1 Corinthians 12:11, “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.” There is a spiritual bond that is shared between Christians. This is why Romans 12:4 says that we are “one body in Christ.” The moment we are saved, we become a part of the universal body of believers made up of all who have believed the Gospel since the church began.

2. The New Testament Also Gives Examples Of Local Churches.

Christians are not only part of the universal church, they are also commanded to be part of local churches that gather to fulfill the great commission from Matthew 28:19-20 to baptize and make

disciples. In the book of Acts alone there are at least four local churches mentioned:

Acts 11:22 mentions the church at Jerusalem

Acts 13:1 mentions the church at Antioch

Acts 18:22 mentions the church at Caesarea

Acts 20:17 mentions the church at Ephesus

Add to this that almost every New Testament letter was written, not to individual Christians, but to local churches and you begin to see the pattern that Christians are to be living as the universal church in local congregations. This is what Paul had in mind when he writes in Romans 12:4 that we are also “members of one another.”

3. The Language Of “Member” Is That Of A Body Part That Is Essential To The Function Of The Church.

The Greek word used in the Bible for “member” most commonly was used to describe a person’s limb. Employing this imagery, Paul described how the ministry of the local church ought to work in Ephesians 4:11-16 when he wrote,

And He gave some *as* apostles, and some *as* prophets, and some *as* evangelists, and some *as* pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him who is the head, *even* Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

In Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12, Paul taught that, as a body has parts that each fill a different function, each person is gifted and equipped by God for different roles. But can you imagine a hand saying it doesn’t want the pressure of having to commit to the body?

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4. The Church Is Clearly Made Up Only Of Believers.

In 1 Corinthians 1:1-2, Paul addressed the church at Corinth when he wrote,

Paul, called *as* an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, to the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their *Lord* and ours.

The church at Corinth was understood to be people who were actually saved. But either that means no unsaved people were attending and coming to the meetings or that the church only recognized saved people as part of the church itself. But that would mean that there was a distinction between the church and not the church.

5. Acts 2 Shows That The Pattern For Christians Is To Believe, Be Baptized, And Then Belong To A Local Church.

On the day of Pentecost, when the church began, the Holy Spirit came and indwelt believers when they believed the Gospel message of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as preached by Peter. Acts 2:41-47 records their response to this event,

So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they *began* selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

These people believed, were baptized, and then immediately were added to the church. But they didn't just show up to Sundays. The text says they were committed to one another and were serving one another on the basis of their common beliefs and desire to live godly lives.

6. Some Believers Were Willing To Publicly Identify With The Church In Jerusalem While Others Resisted.

In the earliest days of the church, people were being saved and joining the church. However, not everyone was joining. We read in Acts 5:12-14,

At the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were taking place among the people; and they were all with one accord in Solomon's portico. But none of the rest dared to associate with them; however, the people held them in high esteem. And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to *their number*.

This local church was growing rapidly. Yet, in the face of persecution, some believers were scared to publicly associate with the local church in Jerusalem. The word used for "associate" is elsewhere translated as "join", "cling to," or "unite" and can even mean "to be glued to." This shows that there was a practice of people publicly joining the local church.

7. Both Jesus And Paul Discuss Removing People From The Church

Matthew 18:16-18, Romans 16:17, 1 Corinthians 5:1-13, 2 Thessalonians 3:6, and Titus 3:9-11 all discuss the sad duty of churches to remove people from the church because of vile, unrepentant sin, such as the man committing adultery and maybe even incest in 1 Corinthians 5. But if people are being removed, the question remains: removed from what? The only answer is: from church membership.

The church is to minister to hurting people with pasts, sins, mistakes, and suffering. Unfortunately, sometimes that means removing people that are doing more hindering than helping. For example, it is one thing, in the medical field, to try to heal sick people. It is another thing to tolerate a sick patient running around the hospital trying to make everyone catch what he has! These people should not be allowed to teach, serve, or vote while they are in open and unrepentant rebellion against God's Word, God's leaders, and God's church. Church membership protects the testimony and health of the local church by requiring new members to have credible testimonies of salvation, by giving them pastoral care, by having covenants of conduct and statements of faith, and by keeping those who are trying to grow and change safe from those infecting the church.

8. The Church People Had A Decision-Making Role.

Contrary to some models of church government, the Biblical model of church government involves the people of the church ratifying the church leaders' decisions. For example, in Acts 6:1-7, when the church needed to select men to help meet the physical needs of people in the church and to free the elders to preach and to pray, it was the elders who suggested doing this, but it was the church who agreed and picked the actual people. Another prime example is that in both Matthew 18:15-18 and in 2 Corinthians 2:6, it was the church who removed people, not the leaders. While the New Testament writers wrote often about submitting to church leadership, such as in 1 Timothy 5:17-20 and Hebrews 13:17, they also taught the church not to follow men that will lead the church astray, such as in 1 John 4:1-6. The church people were to play a part in making decisions for the good of the whole church.

But given the fact that the congregation has this responsibility, who gets to vote? Do people who have never given any indication that they understand or believe the Gospel get to vote? Does anyone who has ever attended the church even once get to vote, even if that person was just in town visiting an aunt or if that person used to be regular but hasn't been at church in twenty years? Does someone who hates the church and is spreading false rumors about it get to vote? Does someone who is in complete disagreement with the core mission, values, and beliefs of the church get to vote? If there are people who have the authority to vote, then there must have been a sense of who was a member and who wasn't. Only church membership provides a context for the people of the church to participate in this process.

9. To Care For The Widows Of The Church, There Were Lists Of Which Widows Qualified.

In 1 Timothy, Paul writes a letter to Timothy to teach him how to pastor and order the local church. In 1 Timothy 5:9-16, he gave instructions about how to care for widows. He was adamant that churches ought to do so, both spiritually and financially. But which widows were the church responsible for? In verses 9-12, he stated,

A widow is to be put on the list only if she is not less than sixty years old, *having been* the wife of one man, having a reputation for good works; *and* if she has brought up children, if she has shown hospitality to strangers, if she has washed the saints' feet, if she has assisted those in distress, *and* if she has devoted herself to every good work.

This reveals that, at the very least, the church had an idea of who the widows were in the church that were being cared for. Each church was to care for the widows who were in that particular church. It seems highly likely that, if the church is keeping track of its widows, it is keeping track of its other congregants as well.

10. The Commands To Be Faithful And Involved In Assembling Together Shows The Expectations Of Being Committed To A Local Church.

To encourage Christians living under growing persecution, the writer of the book of Hebrews exhorted Christians to be faithful to one another and to regularly gather, stating in Hebrews 10:23-25,

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging *one another*; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

Individual Christians are expected to be faithful in gathering with other Christians and to be involved in each other's lives. Church involvement, in the New Testament, was always intended to be regular, involved, and committed.

When we consider these ten evidences in the New Testament, the basic concept of church membership, of committing ourselves to a local church, appears to be well grounded in the biblical witness. Granted, the idea of church membership may be more developed today than it was in the first century, as one would expect. But the idea that Christians are members of Christ's body and ought to, on the basis of belief, be baptized and to join a local church where they can be under pastoral care, in fellowship with other believers, and use their gifts to serve is abundantly clear. But why does God want us to join a local church? Let's examine four practical examples of why church membership matters.

1. Church Membership Guards Doctrine

In 2 Peter 3:17-18, the Apostle Peter, writing to persecuted Christians, reminded them to "be on your guard so that you are not carried away by the error of unprincipled men and fall from your own steadfastness, but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." Christians are to guard the teaching of the Bible against false doctrine. But how does it do this?

The answer is, unsurprisingly, church membership! Church members, in a church that is doing its due diligence, will have shared their testimonies of salvation and will have stated their agreement to the basic beliefs and practices of the particular church. By only allowing members to teach and serve in leading others, the church greatly increases its ability to guard its doctrine from false teaching and false teachers that have come in to seek to undermine the message of the Gospel.

2. Church Membership Aids Pastors

The Bible tells pastors that they are to do more than public preaching. Peter, in 1 Peter 5:1-4, taught elders/pastors to shepherd the church, to be involved in personally ministering to its people. But how do pastors know who they are to pastor?

Several years ago, a young man had been attending the church I was pastoring for some time, but he had never joined. Unfortunately, at a point in his life, he began making choices that, as his pastor, I could not sit by and watch him make without at least trying to talk him out of it. When we met for coffee and I shared my concerns, he reacted very strongly and said, “What gives you the right to barge into my life?” I responded that, as his pastor, I have a responsibility to him out of love for him and to Jesus for those whom I pastor. To this, he responded, “I never asked you to pastor me!” As I thought about it, he was right, he hadn’t ever asked me to pastor him! By not joining his local church, he had never indicated that he wanted me to be involved in his life!

Local church membership indicates to the church leaders that you want to be pastored, that you want to be looked after, that you want to be included, and that you want to be cared for. Do you want your church leaders to check in from time to time when you are sick and to visit you in the hospital? Do you want them to help you grow? Do you want to have them pray for you? Do you want them to challenge you when you are going down a dangerous path? Frankly, if you do not join a church, you really have no right to feel hurt if you aren’t looked after. You never asked to be!

3. Church Membership Encourages Growth

The local church is essential for our personal growth in Christ. Joining a local church provides an environment that is conducive to growth. After all, a farmer cannot make a seed grow, but he can give the seed everything it needs to grow healthy. The local church provides the believer with sound teaching, pastoral care, encouraging relationships, and opportunities to serve, everything a believer needs to grow in faith!

Further, not only does church membership encourage personal growth but it also encourages church growth numerically. When people are committed to a local church, they tend to be more passionate about the mission of the local church to proclaim the gospel and to make disciples. Healthy church membership translates into a passion for the lost and an attractive church family to invite people to join. For example, in Acts 2, we not only see what a healthy church looks like, but we also see the result when verse 47 states, “The Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.”

4. Church Membership Leads To Meaningful Relationships

Each of us want relationships that are real, deep, and meaningful both in the good times in life and when life is difficult. But how do you form such relationships without commitment? While church membership is not an automatic cure for loneliness, commitment breeds trust and trust breeds intimacy. There is a difference between living with your girlfriend and being married to your wife. What is the difference? Commitment. Church membership communicates to the local church that you are joining them, committed to them, accepting of them, and willing to grow, serve, and persevere with them.

As we have seen, the first generation of Christians who believed the Gospel were baptized and joined to local churches of like faith and practice to fulfill the Great Commission. God has designed membership not only for the good of the church as a whole, but also for our individual good as well! By joining a local church, we participate in God’s plan for growing us, reaching our world, and glorifying Himself!