

Church Membership

True Belonging

Introduction

- In a day when commitment is a rare commodity, it is no surprise that church membership is a low priority to so many believers
- It is not uncommon for Christians to move from church to church, never submitting themselves to the care of elders and never committing themselves to a group of fellow believers
- To neglect—or to refuse—to join a church as a formal member, however, reflects a misunderstanding of the believer's privileges and responsibility to the body of Christ

Misunderstandings of Church Membership

- We live in an age when many professing Christians see little or no need for “organized” religion
- Thus, Christian faith becomes merely a “private” matter
- A “**consumerist**” view of church: The church is often viewed as a service provider and members as customers, leading to “church shopping” based on personal preferences for preaching, music, or community rather than spiritual commitment
- This mindset shifts focus from selflessness and giving to receiving, prioritizing personal satisfaction and immediate needs. There is a lack of long-term commitment of building something meaningful

1 Cor 12:12-27 (NASB)

- ¹² For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. ¹³ 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.
- ¹⁴ For the body is not one member, but many. ¹⁵ If the foot says, "Because I am not a hand, I am not *a part* of the body," it is not for this reason any the less *a part* of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear says, "Because I am not an eye, I am not *a part* of the body," it is not for this reason any the less *a part* of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. ¹⁹ If they were all one member, where would the body be? ²⁰ But now there are many members, but one body. ²¹ And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; or again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." ²² On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; ²³ and those members of the body which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our less presentable members become much more presentable, ²⁴ whereas our more presentable members have no need of it. But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that member which lacked, ²⁵ so that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.
- ²⁷ Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it.

Definition of Church Membership

- To become a member of a church is to formally commit oneself to an identifiable, local body of believers who have joined together for specific, divinely ordained purposes
- These purposes include:
 - Receiving instruction from God's Word ([1 Tim. 4:13](#); [2 Tim. 4:2](#))
 - Serving one another through the use of spiritual gifts ([Rom. 12:3-8](#); [1 Cor. 12:4-31](#); [1 Pet. 4:10-11](#))
 - Participating in the sacraments ([Luke 22:19](#); [Acts 2:38-42](#))
 - Proclaiming the gospel to those who are lost ([Matt. 28:18-20](#))

Definition of Church Membership

- In addition, when one becomes a member of a church, he submits himself to the care and the authority of the biblically qualified elders that God has placed in that assembly
- Church membership is a formal relationship between a local church and a Christian
- This relationship is characterized by the church's affirmation and oversight of a Christian's discipleship and the Christian's submission to living out his or her discipleship in the care of the church

The Biblical Basis for Church Membership

- Although Scripture does not contain an explicit command to formally join a local church, the biblical foundation for church membership permeates the New Testament
- This biblical basis can be seen most clearly in:
 - The example of the early church
 - The existence of church government
 - The exercise of church discipline

Early Church Practice

- In the early church, coming to Christ was joining the church. The idea of experiencing salvation without belonging to a local church is foreign to the New Testament
- When individuals repented and believed in Christ, they were baptized and added to the church ([Acts 2:41](#), [47](#); [5:14](#); [16:5](#))
- More than simply living out a private commitment to Christ, this meant joining together formally with other believers in a local assembly and devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer ([Acts 2:42](#))

Early Church Practice

- There is evidence in the New Testament that there was a list of widows eligible for financial support ([1 Tim. 5:9](#))
- Paul talks about the need to exclude “those outside” the church because of their sinful behavior ([1 Cor 5:12-13](#))
- When a believer moved to another city, his church often wrote a letter of commendation to his new church ([Acts 18:27](#); [Rom. 16:1](#); [Col. 4:10](#))
- In the book of Acts, much of the terminology fits with the concept of formal church membership. Phrases such as “the whole congregation” ([6:5](#)), “the church in Jerusalem” ([8:1](#)), “the disciples” in Jerusalem ([9:26](#)), and “the whole church” ([15:17](#)), all suggest recognizable church membership

The Existence of Church Government

- The consistent pattern throughout the NT is that a plurality of elders is to oversee each local body of believers. The specific duties given to these elders presuppose a clearly defined group of church members who are under their care
- The elders are responsible to shepherd God's people ([Acts 20:28](#); [1 Pet. 5:2](#)), to labour diligently among them ([1 Thess. 5:12](#)), to have charge over them ([1 Thess. 5:12](#); [1 Tim. 5:17](#)), and to keep watch over their souls ([Heb. 13:17](#)). Scripture teaches that the elders will give an account to God for the individuals allotted to their charge ([Heb. 13:17](#); [1 Pet. 5:3](#))
- The task of elders shepherding people requires that there be a distinguishable, mutually understood membership in the local church
- Conversely, Scripture teaches that believers are to submit to their elders. [Heb. 13:17](#) says, "Obey your leaders, and submit to them"

The Exercise of Church Discipline

- The exercise of church discipline according to Matthew 18 and other passages ([1 Cor. 5:1-13](#); [1 Tim. 5:20](#); [Titus 3:10-11](#)) presupposes that the elders of a church know who their members are
- For example, the elders of ORPC have neither the responsibility nor the authority to discipline a member of the church down the street
- Sadly, the widespread lack of understanding of church membership has made it necessary for our elders to discipline not only formal members but also those who regularly attend ORPC
- However, the Bible's teaching on church discipline assumes church membership

The Exercise of Church Discipline

- In [Matthew 18:15-17](#), Jesus outlines the way the church is to seek the restoration of a believer who has fallen into sin—a four-step process commonly known as church discipline
- First, when a brother sins, he is to be confronted privately by a single individual (v. 15)
- If he refuses to repent, that individual is to take one or two other believers along to confront him again (v. 16)
- If the sinning brother refuses to listen to the two or three, they are then to tell it to the church (v. 17)
- If there is still no repentance, the final step is to put the person out of the assembly (v. 17; cf. [1 Cor. 5:1-13](#))

Privileges of Church Membership

- Privileges of church membership include spiritual care from elders and other members, a deeper community of faith, opportunities to participate in worship and ministries, and a right to guidance and counsel from the church leadership
- Members also have the privilege of being involved in the church's decision-making processes and a sense of belonging within a spiritual family

Privileges of Church Membership

- Each member church shall have the right to appoint representatives (“Representatives”) to represent it at the general meetings of the Presbytery to which it belongs and the general meetings of the Synod
- If a member church has a separate congregation that serves a different language group and that congregation has been accepted to be a member of the relevant Presbytery, the member church may appoint Representatives from that congregation to attend the general meetings of that Presbytery and the general meetings of the Synod

Conclusion—Why Membership Matters

- It is biblical and practiced in the early church
- It is a pre-requisite to taking Communion (1 Cor 11:20, 33)
- It is required, in most cases, to serve or lead other Christians
- It is how to follow Christian leaders in terms of church government
- It helps church leaders to “give an account” for their people (1 Cor 5)
- It gives structure or accountability to obey and follow Jesus

Moving Attenders to Members

- Get to know current members
- Show appreciation and care for current members
- Teach on Christian living through commitment to the church
- Strengthen the borders of the church by restricting certain activities
- Do the work of encouraging people to join