



# ***Why Church Membership?***

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## **I. Biblical basis for church membership**

### **A. Evidence that the early church had some form of “membership”**

#### **1. Numbers were known**

Acts 1:15 -- 120

Acts 2:41 – added 3,000

Acts 4:4 – 5,000

#### **2. Rolls were kept**

**1 Timothy 5:9** “Widows indeed” were recognized members of the congregation whose needs were known and whose names were put on a special care list.

#### **3. Servants were chosen by the congregation**

**Acts 6:2-5** the apostles instructed the believers in Jerusalem to “select from among you” seven men to serve the people.

“From among you” indicates that some kind of “whose in” and “whose out” lists were maintained. At the very minimum, there was an understanding that believers identified themselves with other believers in some formal way.

#### **4. Discipline was practiced**

**1 Corinthians 5:12-13** For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? But those who are outside, God judges. Remove the wicked man from among yourselves.

Again, the phrase “from among” indicates that the local congregation at Corinth knew who was a part of the church.

#### **5. Worship was corporate**

**1 Corinthians 14:23** If therefore the whole church should assemble together...

NOTE: The modern day trend among some homeschoolers to “home church” is completely unbiblical and antibiblical. The early church may have met in homes, but they did not “home church.”

#### **6. Pastors/shepherds must give an account for their flock**

**Hebrews 13:17** Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account.

QUESTION: How can pastors keep watch over their flock and stand before God to give an account for the flock that God entrusted to their care if they do not have a means by which to know who is in the flock and who is outside the flock?

### **B. Bare essentials of membership – Acts 2:41-47**

1. Salvation
2. Believer's baptism
3. Desire to participate in basic functions of the body
  - Agreement with fundamental doctrines and willingness to be taught
  - Care for other members of the church family (fellowship)
  - Faithful remembrance of the Lord's Supper
  - Praying for one another

### **C. Responsibilities of members to their church**

1. Regular attendance – Hebrews 10:24-25
2. Financial support – 1 Cor. 16:2
3. Devotion – Romans 12:10
4. Confession and Prayer – James 5:16
5. Service – Gal. 5:13; 1 Peter 4:10
6. Willingness to confront sinning brethren – Gal. 6:1
7. Openness to being confronted by caring brethren – Matthew 18:15-17

## **II. Working definition of church membership**

Church membership is the outward demonstration of one's inner commitment to identify with Christ and His followers, be taught the Scriptures, submit to God's ordained authority structure, selflessly serve other believers, and grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ *together*.

## **III. Practical necessities of a "membership"**

Though the oversight of the local church is delegated to spiritually-gifted and qualified men called *Elders* (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9) who then delegate certain responsibilities to spiritually qualified men called *Deacons* (1 Timothy 3:8-13), wise servant leaders will conscientiously maintain the involvement of the church members in the following matters.

### **A. Church discipline requires it**

**Matthew 18:15-17** – the entire church is brought into the process in step 3

**I Corinthians 5:1-13** – the entire church must voice its displeasure with the disobedient brother. (Note: II Corinthians 2:6 says, "this punishment . . . was inflicted by the many.")

*Note the basic occasions that warrant church discipline:*

- When moral purity is lost (I Cor. 5)
- When doctrinal purity is under attack (I John 7-11; Rev. 2:18-22; II Tim. 4:3-5).
- When public testimony is compromised (II Thes. 3:14; I Tim. 5:8).
- When church unity is undermined (Titus 3:10)

#### Purposes of Church Discipline<sup>1</sup>

- To glorify God (Matthew 18:15-20; Luke 17:3-4; Romans 16:7; 1 Cor. 5)
- To maintain the purity of the church (1 Cor. 5:6-8, 11:27)
- To produce faith (1 Timothy 1:19-20; Titus 1:13)
- To evangelize the unsaved (2 Timothy 2:24-26; Proverbs 11:30b; James 5:19-20)
- To set an example (1 Timothy 5:20)
- To silence false teachers (Romans 16:17-18; Titus 1:10-11)
- To restore sinning believers (Matthew 18:15 1 Cor. 5:5; Galatians 6:1-2; 2 Thess. 3:14-15; Hebrews 12:10-13; James 5:20)
- To protect the testimony of the church (2 Cor. 2:9, 17)
- To deter the Lord of the church from bringing cause to discipline the body (Rev. 2:14-15)

#### **B. Selection and affirmation of church leaders require it**

**Acts 6:1-7** – servants (deacons) were selected by the congregation and appointed by the apostles

Verse 5 – the “whole congregation” chose Stephen and the others

Verse 3 – the apostles maintained the responsibility of putting these men “in charge” of areas of ministry responsibility

#### **C. Confirmation of missionaries, sent-ones, requires it**

**Acts 13:13;14:26-27** -- It was the church as a whole which released (13:3) the missionaries and it was the church that heard the report of the missionaries upon their return (14:26-27).

#### **D. Major doctrinal conflicts require it**

Acts 15:1-3, 22-23 – the apostles and elders met to resolve a doctrinal controversy, which was then communicated to the whole church who then was involved in selecting men to carry the message as their representatives.

#### **E. Financial accountability requires it**

**I Cor. 16:3; II Cor. 8:19,23** – those who handled the church’s finances were “approved” by the recognized congregation

## IV. More reasons to join a church<sup>1</sup>

### A. You prove that you're not ashamed to identify with Christ or His people

**Mark 8:38** [Jesus said] "For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels"

When you join a church you make it clear whose side you're on. You're telling the family of God that you're part of the family too, and that you don't want to be considered on the outside (1 Corinthians 5:12-13) any longer. (*Disciplines*, p. 50)

### B. You stop being an independent Christian

*Joining a church demonstrates that you are willing to:*

- **Be accountable to other believers**

**Matthew 18:15-17** And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen *to you*, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer.

- **Be in submission to spiritual authority**

**Hebrews 13:17** Obey your leaders, and submit *to them*; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.

If you aren't part of the church, it has no authority over you and cannot do what Jesus said to do. Unless you join the church, your independence places you outside the way Jesus wants things to happen. (*Disciplines*, p. 50)

### C. You participate in a stronger, more unified effort of God's people

And as your local church reaches across the country and around the world in direct and indirect support of missionary work, you can participate in ways of reaching the world for Christ that you could have never dreamed otherwise. In contrast, consider the potential negative impact on our efforts to talk about Jesus if we don't join His earthly body. How believable is our testimony of the goodness and greatness of Christ if we don't want to identify openly with Christ's family? (*Disciplines*, p. 51).

### D. You have a greater opportunity to use your spiritual gift

1 Corinthians 12 makes it clear that the Holy Spirit has gifted each believer with at least one supernatural empowerment for the benefit of others and the building up of the body of Christ

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<sup>1</sup> Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines Within the Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996), p. 49-54.

(Cf. 1 Peter 4:10).

Yes, you can use your spiritual gift for the good of God's people without joining a church. But in a lot of churches, many of the ministry opportunities are available for church members only. That's because the church wants to know that you stand with her doctrinally and support her ministry goals before you're asked to minister in certain positions. (*Disciplines*, p. 51)

### **E. You openly demonstrate the reality of the Body of Christ**

**1 Corinthians 12:27** Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it.

When you join a church, you make it visible. You give a living demonstration of the spiritual reality of the body of Christ. You show that even though you are an individual, you are a part of the body and you are joined together with others. You take the body of Christ out of the realm of the theoretical and give it a meaning that people can see. (*Disciplines*, p. 52)

### **F. You participate in a more balanced ministry**

**Ephesians 4:11-16** teaches that God gave spiritually-gifted men to the church for the purpose of leading and teaching His people. It also teaches that wholeness and balanced growth as a Christian is dependent on the proper working of each individual part. In other words, independent Christians are always imbalanced.

God has designed us so that we can't get this well-rounded ministry on our own. No one develops the proper spiritual symmetry just by listening to Christian radio, watching Christian television, or reading Christian books. You can't get this kind of maturity merely by participating in a group Bible study. Unless you're an active part of a local church, your Christian life and ministry will be imbalanced. (*Disciplines*, p. 52).

### **G. You demonstrate your commitment "to the proper working of each individual part"**

**Ephesians 4:15-16** ...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 that which 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.

Consider the 'spiritual hitchhiker' who has settled all his major questions and has definitely decided where he wants to attend church, but now he wants all the benefits and privileges of that church's ministry without taking any responsibility for it. His attitude is all take and no give. He wants no accountability, just a free ride.

This is not meant to discourage those who are attending a church to find answers about Jesus Christ and are still uncertain about their eternal destiny. If that describes you, your first priority is to come to Christ rather than to come for church membership.

Neither is this intended to deter those who are sincerely and actively seeking God's will in a decision about a church home. Sometimes that decision cannot be made quickly. A wise person evaluates a church carefully before joining its membership.

A spiritual hitchhiker, however, has no real intention of joining the church, at least not soon. He only wants to enjoy its advantages without any obligation on his part. He wants convenience without commitment, to be served rather than to serve. But every true Christian is to be committed to 'the proper working of each individual part' (Ephesians 4:16) in a local church. When you join a church, you're saying you believe in taking *your* individual part and that you

don't want to be a spiritual hitchhiker. (*Disciplines*, p. 53)

## H. You encourage new believers to be committed to the local body of Christ

**Hebrews 10:24-25** ...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.

Notice the command to 'consider one another' that is associated here with church involvement. Bear in mind the message you give to other believers, especially new believers, if you do not join a church. What are you modeling to new believers when you remain uncommitted to the local church? Do they see your example and learn that church isn't important enough to join? Do they get the message that the kingdom of God is not worth such an investment of yourself? Do they interpret your actions as saying that the work of God does not deserve a full commitment? (*Disciplines*, pp. 53, 54)

## I. You encourage a ministry when you consider it faithful and join it

**Hebrews 10:24-25** ...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.

Suppose John loves Mary and sees no one else but her for ten years. Every time they are together he tells her that he loves her, but he never proposes to her. Finally, after a decade she has enough nerve to ask him, 'John, why haven't you wanted to marry me?'

If he says, 'I'm just trying to make sure,' how do you think she will feel? Of course, she's glad he says he loves her, and she's thankful for all he does for her, and she's pleased that he doesn't see anyone else, but in spite of all that, she's going to be somewhat discouraged because he doesn't love her enough to decisively commit to her.

The people and pastor of a church are glad whenever you attend. But if you keep coming and never join, they may begin to wonder what Mary wondered about John, despite how happy you seem to be with the church and how many wonderful things you say about it. There is a sense in which your attendance and involvement can actually discourage the church and its leaders if, after reasonable time, you do not join it.

Conversely, the church is encouraged...and its leadership is encouraged, when you indicate by joining the church that you love it and think it is a biblically faithful ministry worthy of your commitment. (*Disciplines*, p. 54)

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Shannon, from a workshop presented at Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, CA, March, 2006.