

What the Bible Teaches About Church Membership

Pastor Tom Hicks



The Definition of Church Membership

Everyone God saves immediately becomes a member of the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13), which is the universal Church (Eph 5:23-27). But immediately after that, new believers seek to be added to a specific local church. Acts 2:41 says, “So, those who received his word were baptized, and *there were added* that day about three thousand souls.” Notice the order in which these things happened. First, they believed the Word of the Gospel. Second, they were baptized. And third, they were *added* to the local church at Jerusalem. And there was a specific known number who were added: 3,000 souls. That means there was a specific accounting of local church membership in the Jerusalem church.

But what is a believer committing to do when he joins a local church? According to Acts 2, he commits himself to an identifiable local group of believers who have covenanted (mutually agreed) with one another to believe and obey the Word of God together. Acts 2:42 describes what the members of the Jerusalem church devoted themselves to: “They *devoted themselves* to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

There are four things they “devoted themselves” to doing together. First, they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching within the local church, which is the teaching and preaching of the Word of God. Second, they devoted themselves to fellowship, which means they were committed to sharing and caring for one another in the church. Third, they devoted themselves to the breaking of bread, which is a reference to the Lord's Supper. And fourth, they devoted themselves to “the prayers,” which is public prayer within the assembled church.

The Bible teaches that covenanted believers, or local churches, mutually agree to receive instruction from God's Word (1 Tim 4:13; 2 Tim 4:2), to edify one another by means of their respective spiritual gifts (Rom 12:3-8; 1 Cor 12:4-31; 1 Pet 4:10-11), to participate in the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper (Lk 22:19; Acts 2:38-42), to practice church discipline faithfully (Matt 18:15-17), and to proclaim the gospel to the lost (Matt 28:18-20). This is why the Bible, church membership and church attendance are inextricably connected. It's impossible to fulfill the duties of church membership, which include faithful devotion to the things just mentioned, if one does not attend church. It makes no biblical sense for someone to be a member of a church if that person does not attend.

The Biblical Basis of Church Membership

Though the Bible never issues an explicit command to join a local church, the principle of church membership appears clearly and consistently throughout the New Testament. The Scriptural principle of formal local church membership is revealed by (1) the example of New Testament churches, (2) the existence of church government, (3) the exercise of church discipline, and (4) the exhortation to mutual edification.

1. The Example of the New Testament Churches

Throughout the New Testament, whenever individuals repent of their sins and trust in Jesus, they also commit themselves to a specific local church. Scripture teaches that new converts were baptized and added to a specific local church (Acts 2:41, 47; 5:14; 16:5). The idea of private, churchless Christianity was completely foreign to New Testament believers; rather, they practiced their faith corporately, devoting “themselves to the apostles teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers” (Acts 2:42).

a. New Testament letters were written to specific local churches. Furthermore, all of the New Testament letters were written to whole local churches or to leaders in the local churches (e.g., Ephesians was written to the Ephesian church; 1 and 2 Timothy were letters written to the pastor of the Ephesian church, etc.). This shows that the Bible assumes the existence of local assemblies of believers, or local churches, who were mutually covenanted with or committed to one another in Christ. Put negatively, the New Testament letters were not written to churchless Christians, but only to those who are members of local church.

b. Each local church in the New Testament had a specific recorded number of church members. Just as there was a written list of the names of widows who were eligible to receive financial support (1 Tim 5:9), there was also a specific accounting of church members. This number of church members included those who had been converted, baptized, and added to a specific local church (Acts 2:41, 47; 5:14; 16:5).

c. Local churches recommended their members to other local churches, when they moved. Additionally, when a believer moved to another location and had to join another church, his home church often wrote a letter of recommendation to his new church (Acts 18:27; Rom 16:1; Col 4:10; cf. 2 Cor 3:1-2). This would make no sense if believers were not members of a specific local church that was responsible to oversee them and care for their souls.

d. The New Testament refers to churches in terms that only fit with the idea of formal, or official, church membership. It uses phrases such as “the whole congregation” (6:5), “the church in Jerusalem” (8:1), “the disciples in Jerusalem” (9:26), “in every church” (14:23), “the whole church” (15:17), and “the elders of the church” in Ephesus (20:17). Each of these phrases suggests that there was a known and specified group of professing believers in a well-defined local assembly (1 Cor 5:4; 14:23; and Heb 10:25). New Testament church membership was composed of those who were baptized, attended the public worship, submitted to the leadership and discipline of the church, and participated in the life and fellowship of the church.

2. The Existence of Church Government

The New Testament gives responsibilities to pastors/elders which presuppose a clearly delineated group of church members who are under their care.

a. Pastoral leadership of a church requires a known church membership. Pastors (or elders) are required to shepherd the church (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:2). But, without a clear definition of the church, and the specific members of that church, it would be impossible for pastors to discharge their duties faithfully. Pastors are called to labor diligently in the church (1 Thess 5:12; 1 Tim 5:17) and to watch

over the souls under their charge (Heb 13:17). The Bible teaches that pastors/elders will give an account to God for those in their care (Heb 13:17; 1 Pet 5:3).

Therefore, the responsibilities of pastors demand a distinguishable and mutually understood membership in the local church. Pastors can only give an account for the spiritual well being of the church if the church has a well-defined membership! They can only shepherd a flock if they know who is a member of the flock and who is not a member.

Pastors are not responsible for the spiritual well-being of every person who visits or attends the church. Rather, they are responsible for those who have voluntarily and consciously submitted themselves to the care and authority of the pastors of a specific local church.

b. Submission of church members to pastors requires mutually understood church membership. Conversely, Scripture teaches that believers are to submit to their pastors in their local church in all things lawful. Hebrews 13:17 says, “Obey your leaders and submit to them.” But, how do believers know who their leaders are? To whom are believers to submit as their leaders? A person who refuses to join a local church has no identifiable leaders. For that person, obedience to Hebrews 13:17 is impossible because he has not agreed to submit to any particular leader and no leader has agreed to lead him. Hebrews 13:17 assumes that every believer knows the leaders to whom he must submit; therefore, it assumes a clearly defined church membership.

3. The Exercise of Church Discipline

a. Church discipline requires clear knowledge of those who are actually members of the church. Matthew 18:15-17 describes a four-step process of church discipline to confront sin among members of a church. First, if a brother sins, then another brother is to confront him privately. Second, if he refuses to repent, then the brother must take one or two others with him. Third, if he still refuses to repent, those confronting him are required to tell it to the church. Fourth, if there is still no repentance, then he is to be removed from the church (Matt 18:17; 1 Cor 5:1-13). Matthew 18:17 assumes that the church is an identifiable body of believers because when private efforts to call a brother to repentance fail, they are to “tell it to the church.” This command would be impossible to obey unless there were an identifiable and limited group of believers recognized as “the church.”

b. Church discipline requires clear knowledge of those who are not members of the church. 1 Corinthians 5:12-13 says, “Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. Purge the evil person from among you” (ESV). Paul recognizes that there are certain people “inside” the local Corinthian church and there are others who are “outside” the local Corinthian church. This implies formal membership. The Corinthians were to “purge,” “remove” (NAS), or “expel” (NIV) the “evil person” who persisted in unrepentant sin, removing him from church membership.

The process of church discipline (Matt 18:15-17; 1 Cor 5:1-13; 1 Tim 5:20; Titus 3:10-11) assumes that a church knows who its members are. One local church does not have the responsibility or authority to carry out formal discipline on a member of another local church, but only within its own local church membership.

4. The Exhortation to Mutual Edification

The New Testament also teaches that each member of a local church must be committed to the spiritual edification and growth of every other church member. The Bible exhorts church members to practice the “one anothers” of the faith (Heb 10:24-25) and to exercise their spiritual gifts (Rom 12:6-8; 1 Cor 12:4-7; 1 Pet 4:10-11) in relationship to other members of the church.

Such devoted mutual edification can only take place in the context of a covenanted body of believers, which is a local church. All of the biblical exhortations for believers to be lovingly involved in one another’s lives for the purpose of mutual encouragement in Christ assume that believers have committed themselves to other known believers in a specific local assembly. Church membership is the biblical way to make that commitment.