

# **The Biblical Basis for Church Membership**

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*Various passages*

March 2, 2014

## **Introduction:**

This morning we embark on a special seven week series entitled, “Church Membership Matters.” The name has a double meaning, in that we first want to consider why church membership matters in terms of it being important. The American evangelical culture today no longer values church membership, or in more extreme cases, doesn’t even value the church itself, opting instead for a “churchless” Christianity where they simply stay at home and do family devotions, or believes one can simply live the Christian life fine and well apart from the messy business of attending a church, much less joining one. So in light of this pervasive cultural pessimism against the church, we’re in desperate need of a defense, an apologetic for why the church is important and why membership in a particular local church is necessary. So to that end, my hope is to convince you of the biblical teaching regarding church membership.

But the other meaning behind this series entitled, “Church Membership Matters” is that we’ll be discussing matters relating to the issue of membership in a local church. One might say my twin goals are to defend the “why” of church membership and instruct on the “what” of church membership, such as what is expected of church members, the role of church discipline for members, and how to terminate your membership in a manner pleasing to God, to name a few matters we’ll give our attention to over the next few weeks.

This series flows out of the conversations that we as an elder board have been having over the past year or so regarding our understanding of the purpose of church membership. It had become clear over time that we weren’t all on the same page in our understanding and so we did some reading together, gained more clarity on the issues, and felt that it would be of benefit to our congregation to focus on these matters in greater detail through a short sermon series. So starting today we have hit the pause button on our series in the Gospel of Matthew and we will be highlighting the importance of and responsibilities of church membership over the next seven weeks.

## **1. Why should I become a member of a church?**

So let me begin this morning with a fundamental question to start off with, which is “Why should I become a member of a church?” Let’s face it, plenty of Christians, when thinking about the topic of church membership, would have this question or at least something close to it, on their lips. So let’s begin with that question today. The short answer to the question “Why should I become a member of a church?” is, “Because it’s biblical.” Unfortunately many professing believers across our nation no longer believe this to be true. Our cultural values have over time worked like water over rock, slowly eroding away our understanding of the importance of church membership so that today church membership is considered optional at best, if it is even considered at all. The cultural erosion has gone so far that many self-identified evangelical Christians now consider regular church attendance an unnecessary element of the Christian life. Rather than identifying themselves with a local congregation, they are choosing a

“church-less Christianity” where they settle for listening to popular Bible teachers on television or the radio, spending Sunday mornings worshipping God “my own way” (which usually ends up looking something like teeing off on the golf course or sipping a latte at Starbucks), or occasionally attending a “house church” where a small group of friends gather for a casual time of prayer and Bible study. Perhaps they’ve had a bad experience with the church in the past or they just don’t see it being relevant in their daily lives, but either way they’ve turned their back on the local church as something irrelevant, outdated, controlling, hypocritical, political, narrow-minded, and simply not worth the bother any longer.

Besides negative personal experiences, there are a number of cultural values that serve as smaller streams feeding into the larger river of our current impoverished view of the church and church membership. These include:

- *Individualism* – One of our most strongly held American values is the idea of the rugged individual who forges his own path, ignoring the naysayers who would try to impede his journey to personal success and glory. Individualism is at odds with the biblical notion of corporate identity and commitment, where an individual surrenders his rights for the sake of the whole.
- *Anti-authoritarianism* – Since the 1960’s and the Watergate era, Americans have become increasingly distrustful of authority of any kind, including the authority of the church. Some of our greatest national heroes are our Founding Fathers who, rather than submit to the governing authority of the British crown, rebelled against them. These days we readily cheer for the rebels of our society, whether they’re the outlaws of the old West, rebellious pop singers and actors who are constantly pushing the boundaries of social taboos, or movie characters like Maximus in *Gladiator* or William Wallace in *Braveheart* who defy kings and emperors for the sake of revenge and political ideals. As a result, the notion of submitting to church leaders is considered something to be avoided rather than embraced.
- *Mobility* – Between the invention of the automobile and the creation of the Interstate, Americans have become highly mobile people. No longer are believers forced to remain at the local neighborhood or village church; they can easily drive to a cornucopia of church options if their present church doesn’t suit them.
- *Consumerism* – In American life, the customer is king. Businesses must either cater to the desires of the consumer or risk going out of business. As a result, Americans tend to approach churches like fast-food restaurants: either the church serves them a selection of services that meet their desires or they’ll find another larger church down the road that will give them what they want at a lower cost (i.e. a church that demands no commitment or accountability).

These influences have eroded our understanding of the importance of church membership and even church attendance. As a result, it is vitally important to begin this series on membership by laying out the biblical basis for church membership since this is often misunderstood and neglected in churches today.

## 2. Where in the Bible does it say you need to become a member of a church?

So then, seeing there is a dearth of understanding of biblical teaching regarding church membership, we must answer the second question which will occupy our remaining time today and it is this, “Where in the Bible does it say you need to become a member of a church?” That’s a question commonly asked by those who don’t want to commit to a local church or see a need to. Now the simple answer to the question might surprise you: it doesn’t. Nowhere in the Bible does it say, “Thou shalt become a member of a church.” No such clear and unambiguous command exists. But, I might add, neither does the Bible say, “God is a Trinity.” Yet just because the Bible doesn’t explicitly say it in so many words doesn’t mean it doesn’t teach it.

For example, the Bible never uses the term “Trinity” to describe God, but throughout Scripture the idea that God’s nature is such that there is one God who exists as three distinct Persons - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - is clearly taught. The term “Trinity” is simply a way to sum up the biblical teaching about the nature of God that isn’t necessarily stated succinctly or explicitly in any one passage.

The same holds true for church membership. The term *membership* is never used in Scripture but the idea of membership is certainly present throughout. Membership is simply a way of making explicit what Scripture implicitly teaches. So no, the Bible never says you need to become a member of a church, but the ideas included in the term, such as commitment to a local church body, accountability to other believers, submission to church leaders, etc., are clearly taught in Scripture. As a result, the concept of church membership is just as true and valid as the doctrine of the Trinity, even though it is not taught explicitly.

So then, having said this, I need to prove it. For the remainder of our time together this morning I wish to lay out for you the biblical basis for church membership. If churches are to have any kind of formal church membership, then certainly there should be biblical warrant for it. So then the following are biblical reasons why I believe church membership is an important and essential practice in the life of a Christian. We’ll begin first with...

### A. The example of God’s people in the Old Testament

At few key examples are worth noting. First, I would have you notice that in the Old Testament *God called his people to community*. God’s plan of salvation began with one man from whom God would create a people for himself. God called Abraham out of Ur and instructed him to journey to the land of Canaan where the Lord promised, “I will make of you a great nation” that would number more than the stars in the sky (Gen. 12:1-3; 13:14-16; 15:5-7). God fulfilled that promise as Abraham had Isaac, Isaac had Jacob, and Jacob had twelve sons whose offspring eventually became known as the Israelites. God then delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and gave them the land of Canaan to possess in fulfillment of his promise.

Thus while God calls individuals to himself, his plan is for those individuals to become part of a community of redeemed people. This speaks strongly to the fact that God wants those he calls to identify themselves with a group of fellow believers.

Second, not only did God call his people to a community but *God called his people to an identifiable community*. The people of Israel were not composed of just anybody who claimed to be an Israelite. In order to be counted as member of the nation of Israel, there were certain marks that identified you as such. In particular, all males had to undergo circumcision as a sign of the covenant (Gen. 17:10-14; Ex. 12:48; Lev. 12:3). You could not be a male Israelite and not be circumcised, as God makes clear to Abraham in Genesis 17:14, "Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant." Circumcision therefore acted as a clearly identifiable means of determining who was considered to be a member of God's people.

Furthermore the various ceremonial rituals, dietary restrictions, purity laws, and ethical commands given to the Israelites in the Law also served to mark out those who were part of God's covenantal community. The nation of Israel was to be distinct from the nations around them and this was to be demonstrated by their holy behavior, as God said in Leviticus 20:26, "You shall be holy to me, for I the Lord am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine."

This shows there were clear identification marks of who was considered an Israelite and who was not. To be a member of the nation of Israel meant you were willing to follow the laws and regulations God prescribed. So also in the local church there should be clear identification markers of who is a member of the church. Not just anybody is a member; rather only those who specifically have identified themselves with the church as signified by various beliefs, behaviors, and commitments.

Third, *God excluded people from his community due to sin*. Those considered unclean (such as through leprosy – see Lev. 13:42-46) or who had committed gross sin (see Lev. 24:10-14 for example) were forced to go outside the camp from where the people of God dwelt. As a result they were excluded from participating in the ritual life of community until the disease or sin was properly dealt with. To be excluded from the community was a serious situation as one would lose his or her access to the sacrificial provisions that came with being a member of God's people.

What this all demonstrates then is that there were clearly identifiable members of the covenant community of Israel who could be excluded from that community for a violation of God's standards. But in order to exclude someone from a community one must have first been identified as a member of that community, which is what church membership does. Furthermore, exclusion from the community of faith was considered to be a seriously detrimental situation in the Old Testament; therefore it is reasonable to assume that not being part of the new covenantal community of faith of the local church (either by voluntary exclusion or by removal through excommunication) is also a dire situation one would want to avoid.

## B. The example of God's people in the New Testament

Now let's consider the example of people in the New Testament. A few things can be said about that, the first of which is that in the NT *believers are shown to regularly gather for worship*. In Acts 2:42-47, we find the early Christians coming together for the purpose of worship, prayer, teaching, fellowship, and communion. In Hebrews 10:24-25, we're instructed, "Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." So the assumed practice of Christians in the New Testament is the habitual gathering together for corporate worship as an identifiable group of people.

Second, *most of the epistles assume believers are numbered as part of a local church*. With the exception of a few epistles (1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon, which are written to church leaders), most are written to a clearly defined group of believers within a city or geographic area – Ephesus, Colossae, Philippi, Rome, Corinth, etc. To be a Christian meant you were identified with the church that met in your community.

Third, *the epistles frequently mention believers by name*. For example, the apostle Paul greets many believers at the church in Rome by name in Romans 16. This is a pattern repeated throughout the epistles written to local churches. This indicates the church included specific people who were considered to be part of that congregation.

Fourth, *the epistles also exclude people from the church by name*. Paul warns Timothy of two false teachers by the name of "Hymenaeus and Philetus" who were claiming the resurrection had already taken place (2 Tim. 2:17-18). Furthermore the apostle John calls out a man named Diotrephes in 3 John 9 due to his unwillingness to submit to authority. This demonstrates that churches had the responsibility to exclude specific individuals from fellowship due to false teaching or unrepentant sin.

Fifth and finally, *people were recognized as either being part of the church or not part of the church based upon their commitment to the church*. The apostle John writes, "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us" (1 John 2:19). Those who were "in" the church and those who were "out" were determined by whether they were committed to meeting regularly with other believers or whether they neglected the regularly assembly of the church for worship.

The cumulative effect of these observations is that local churches throughout the New Testament were composed of clearly identifiable individuals who were actively involved in the regular gathering of believers, but who could also be removed from the church due to false teaching, unrepentant sin, or neglect.

### **C. The explanation of images for the church**

But beyond just those specific examples, there are a number of illustrations Christ and the apostles use to explain what the church is like and how it is to operate. Let me highlight a few of those.

The first image is one that refers to the church as *the Body of Christ*. In 1 Cor. 12:12-27 Paul compares a physical body with all of its members to the spiritual body of Christ, the church. The church is not a single member; it is made up of many members, each interdependent upon the others. One member cannot say to the other, "I don't need you!" Each member needs the other members so that the body as a whole functions properly. As a result, believers are to be "attached" as it were to a local church body they're a part of; no believer can say to the church, "I don't need you," and then go and live the Christian life as a Lone Ranger. Membership connects believers to other believers in the local church.

The next image of the church frequently used in the NT is *the Bride of Christ*. Paul compares the relationship between Christ and the church to that of the relationship between a husband and a wife in Ephesians 5:22-32. Since Christ loves his bride, the church, we also should love the church. Since Christ is committed to the church and works for her well-being (to the point of giving himself up for her on the cross), so also should we have the deepest commitment to working for the good of the church we're involved with. Becoming a member of a church is akin to making marriage vows: you are saying to the church, "I am committing myself to love, serve, and honor the Bride of Christ as expressed in this particular local church."

The third image I'd highlight for you is *the Flock of God*. Throughout John 10, Jesus refers to himself as the "Good Shepherd" and those who follow him as his "sheep." He continues to use this metaphor when reinstating Peter in John 21:15-17, telling him, "Feed my sheep." This implies that one must be able to determine who are and who are not the sheep. Membership allows pastors and elders to know who the sheep are in their particular flock that have been entrusted into their care.

### **D. The exhortation to submit to church leaders**

Moving on now, another key implication of the necessity for membership in a local church comes from the command to submit to church leaders. In Hebrews 13:17 it says, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account." Furthermore, the apostle Peter instructs his readers in 1 Peter 5:5, "Likewise... be subject to the elders." The assumption is that all believers will have church leaders such as elders who they will submit to. But if you're not attending a church, these commands are impossible to obey. By becoming a member of a church, you are formally committing to submit to church leaders.

The command in Hebrews 13:17 operates on the assumption that you have specific leaders whom you can identify and who can identify you. We aren't to submit to just any church leader, but rather to "your leaders," that is, those who are pastors and elders in the local congregation that you're part of. Therefore you need to be a member in a local church with identifiable leaders under whom you are living in submission to.

In addition to this, elders are called to shepherd the flock of God under their care (1 Peter 5:1-4). But in order to obey this command, elders need to be able to identify who exactly is a member of their flock and who is not. Church membership serves as the "fence" that helps define who the sheep are that the elders are responsible for in the local church.

### **E. The exercise of church discipline**

Yet another support for the need for church membership is found in the idea of church discipline. In Matthew 18 Jesus outlines the steps the church should take when dealing with a believer who has fallen into sin: the individual should first be confronted privately, and if he does not respond, then one or two others should come along as well. Finally, if the individual is still unrepentant, it should be brought before the whole church. If after that there is still no repentance, the individual is to be treated as if he were an unbeliever (v. 15-17). Paul instructs the church in Corinth to do this very thing with a man who was in an immoral relationship with his father's wife (1 Cor. 5:1-5). He says, "When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus... you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord."

The practice of church discipline presupposes that the church elders and leaders know who the members of the church are. You can't "excommunicate" someone who was never a part of the church community to begin with. Membership provides a clear delineation of who is in the particular local church and who is not.

### **F. The encouragement to practice "one another" commands**

Finally, church membership undergirds the encouragement to practice the "one another" commands of Scripture, such as "honor one another" (Rom. 12:10), "love one another" (1 John 4:7), "pray for one another" (James 5:16), and so on. These commands are all given with the understanding that they would be practiced in the context of the local church the readers were involved in. They're not commands given for the benefit of a vague group of nameless, faceless Christians; they are meant to be practiced alongside fellow believers with whom they are in fellowship with within their local church.

This means if we're going to truly practice the "one another" commands, we need to do so in the context of a local congregation that we're a part of. Membership in a church helps us clearly identify who those "others" are that we're commanded to pray for, love, honor, and serve.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude then, all of this taken together strongly implies the need for Christians to attach themselves to a local church body where they commit to regularly assemble for worship, submit to church leadership, and love and serve other believers. In short, Christians are to become identifiable members of a local church. To simply casually attend a church or not be involved in a church whatsoever is foreign to the example of God's people throughout history and opposed to the Scriptural expectations given to believers by Christ and the apostles. God's Word clearly expects that every believer is a committed member of a local church. Church membership is, in a word, biblical.

Next week we'll continue further in our study of church membership by considering the purpose of church membership in the life of the Christian, so please come and continue to delve deeper into this important, but sadly often neglected, area of theology. Now, please bow your heads with me and join me in prayer.

**This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Grace Fellowship Church of Waterloo, IA by Pastor Rob Borkowitz. Copyright 2014.**