

The Requirements of Church Membership

Various passages

March 16, 2014

Introduction:

This morning we are continuing on in our seven week sermon series entitled, “Church Membership Matters.” For those of you visiting here for the first time or who haven’t been here the past couple of weeks, we’re taking a break from our regular sermon series that’s been going through the gospel of Matthew in order to give focused attention to an area sadly neglected and often misunderstood. Church membership has in our culture become regarded at worse as something to be avoided and at best just an option a Christian could do or do without, such that one could join a church formally or just attend casually, but it doesn’t really matter either way. The goal of this sermon series is to dispel such a cavalier and dismissive view of church membership and restore to it the importance which the Bible ascribes to it.

To that end we’ve spoke two weeks ago about the biblical basis for church membership as I laid out the fact that while the Bible never directly says, “Thou shalt become a member of a church,” it nevertheless indirectly teaches it throughout the pages of both the Old and New Testaments. With that foundation laid, last week we consider four purposes of church membership in order to highlight the practical importance of church membership in the lives of God’s people. For those of you who missed either or both of those, I would strongly encourage you to either listen to those sermons or at least read the manuscript, both of which are available on our website. Today, we are moving on to our third sermon of this series which will focus on the requirements of church membership.

This morning I’m going to address seven different requirements for church membership. Now let me say this is not an exhaustive list; I could probably add other elements to it as well. But nevertheless I think you could summarize this list of requirements as simply what is expected of those who call themselves a Christian. So even though this list could undoubtedly be expanded, let me give you what I believe are the top seven of the clearest requirements of church members given in Scripture. We’ll begin with the most essential and most obvious requirement and that is...

1. A church member must be a Christian.

Only those who are Christians can become members of the church. This may seem so obvious that it doesn’t need to be said but it really is foundational for why we both accept someone into membership and why we might remove someone from membership. Scripture understands the church to be composed of those who have been born again through the power of the Holy Spirit, who have repented of their sin, and who’ve trusted in Christ’s atoning death on the cross to have satisfied God’s wrath against them.

Now before we go any further, it’s important to understand that Scripture uses the term “church” two different ways. First, it can refer to what is known as the “universal invisible Church” (we’ll call this the large “C” Church). The Church in this respect refers to all

believers who are part of the Body of Christ through faith. Paul writes to the believers in the city of Corinth in 1 Corinthians 12:27 saying, “Now you are the Body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.” In other words, they’re members of the Church universal; it’s “universal” because all Christians from all times and all places are a part of it. But it’s also “invisible” because only God knows with certainty who is a member of it. Scripture is clear there will be people who we’ll regard as Christians, but are in fact not. Like weeds that look identical to wheat (Matt. 13:24-43), so will there be unbelievers who look like believers. Thus the true Church is “invisible” since only God knows who the genuine believers are and who are not.

The other way the term “church” is used is to refer to the “local visible church” (the small “c” church). The church in this respect is made up of believers living in a certain geographical area at a certain period of time who visibly meet together for worship and fellowship. The local church doesn’t include every believer there is and it may include in its membership those who aren’t true believers. So while every member of the universal Church should be a member of the local church (1 Corinthians 12:12-27), not every member of the local church will be a member of the universal Church. The job then of a local church is to determine as best it can that each individual member of the church is also a member of the universal Church; that is, that he or she is truly a Christian.

So when we have membership classes, one of the things we do is we ask people to give their testimony and ask them questions about their understanding of the gospel. We’re trying to determine whether the individual can provide a clear understanding of what Christ has done for them, because if people can’t articulate the gospel, then it’s hard to grant that they’ve believed it. A person must demonstrate he or she understands they’re sinners who stand under God’s wrath but who recognize that on the cross Christ died in their place and by faith they are made righteous and not by good works. So that means sometimes we have to say “wait” to an individual who wants to join, not because we’re exclusive and snobbish but because we have reason to be uncertain as to whether they really meet this first requirement.

Now admittedly, we can’t say with absolute certainty that someone is not a Christian, but if they don’t seem to understand the gospel, or are living in a way that is inconsistent with their profession of faith, it is better to err on the side of caution and tell them to wait and spend some time helping them understand what the gospel is and what it looks like lived out in daily life before allowing them to join. That’s one of the most difficult aspects of my job to do, but one that is absolutely necessary, both for the good of the church but more importantly for the good of the individual. We don’t want to give false assurance to someone just so we can avoid hurting their feelings. A member must be a Christian, and if we have reason to doubt whether a person is, we shouldn’t allow them to become a member until we have reason to be confident in their profession of faith.

2. A church member must be baptized.

The next requirement for becoming a member of a church is that you must be baptized. The pattern seen throughout the New Testament is that shortly after a person becomes a Christian, he or she is baptized (Acts 2:41; 8:12; 8:38; 9:18; 10:48; 16:15; 16:33; 18:8;

19:5). It is assumed by Paul that the believers he writes to had been baptized (Romans 6:3-4; 1 Cor. 1:13-16; 12:13; Gal. 3:27). Thus in following the clear pattern of the New Testament church, we request that everyone who wants to be a member of GFC be baptized if he or she hasn't been baptized already.

We practice what is known as believer's baptism. Throughout the early church baptism was administered to those who made a credible profession of faith. As a result, we believe that only professing believers of Jesus Christ should be baptized; that is, they should be old enough to articulate the gospel and understand what it means. While we recognize other Christian denominations have differing views of the practice of baptism that allows them to baptize infants, we believe baptism is something a believer should be able to remember as a public profession of faith and as a re-enactment of his death to sin and resurrection to new life when he or she put his faith in Christ. Therefore, we require that those who have either never been baptized or were baptized as an infant be baptized in obedience to Christ and as a profession of their faith before the church.

As a church that identifies itself with the Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches, we in particular practice what is known as triune immersion. This means when performing a baptism we immerse the individual three times in the water (once in the name of the Father, once in the name of the Son, and once in the name of the Spirit). We do not request that anyone who underwent believer's baptism by single immersion at another church to be re-baptized, but anyone who is baptized here at Grace Fellowship will be baptized by triune immersion.

So when it comes to membership, we ask anyone who has not undergone believer's baptism to be baptized as a requirement for membership. The New Testament is clear in its expectation that Christians be baptized after they come to faith and therefore anyone who wants to join GFC must first be baptized if he or she hadn't been already.

3. A church member must be striving to live in obedience to Christ.

The third requirement for membership is that every member should be striving to live in obedience to Christ. We are to strive to live righteous lives. We pursue personal righteousness for two reasons. First, it's what Christ calls us to do as his followers. Jesus instructed us to go and make disciples who would "observe everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:20). He expects that those who follow him would be like a wise builder and put his words into practice (Matt. 7:24-27). In the book of Ephesians, the apostle Paul says, "We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10). God expects Christians to be growing in good deeds and obedience to Christ.

Second, God wants to be glorified through his people. In Jeremiah 13:7 the Lord says he called the people of Israel to himself for his glory, proclaiming, "I made the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah cling to me... that they might be for me a people, a name, a praise, and a glory..." Then in Romans 15:16 we're told the church also exists to bring God glory. When interceding for the Roman believers, the apostle Paul prays that, "together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord

Jesus Christ.” We bring our awesome God glory when we live in a manner that reflects his manifold perfections.

When we fail to do that, the opposite happens: instead of bringing God glory, we cause his name to be blasphemed. Paul writes to the Jews in Romans 2:21-24,

“You then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. For, as it is written, ‘The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.’”

As Christian we’re to pursue a life of holiness so God might be glorified through us rather than mocked, ridiculed, and blasphemed because we his people are living in a manner indistinguishable from the rest of the world.

But let me be clear here that this is not a call to sinless perfection. Scripture is clear that believers will struggle with sin. Consider all of Romans 7 or a passage like 1 John 1:8 when it says, “If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” In a church member there should be clear evidence that he or she is pursuing a life of godliness and has genuine contrition for sin. The word “struggle” is the key. We should be wrestling against our sinful flesh, striving to live by the Spirit: sometimes failing, but always repenting, growing over time into greater Christ-likeness as we love Christ more and indulge in our sin less. I expect every member of Grace Fellowship to struggle with sin, just as I do. That’s the normal part of what it is to live the Christian life.

The real concern is when someone is a member and they don’t give any evidence of struggling with sin: when they indulge freely in sin and aren’t troubled by; when they are confronted about their words or actions or attitudes and refuse to repent; when they harbor unforgiveness towards another, hold a grudge, remain angry and never work towards reconciliation. Then that begins to raise the question: where is the Spirit of God in their hearts? Why are they refusing to be convicted, to repent, to put forth the effort to put sin to death and live in obedience to Christ? Should that go on long enough, a church may need to remove such a member from the church because they are no longer striving for righteousness. To witness a lack of the power of the Holy Spirit in their life is to call into question the genuineness of their profession of faith. Church members, as Christians, are to strive to live in obedience to Christ.

4. A church member must be willing to submit to church leadership.

The fourth requirement of church membership is one that we as Americans aren’t too terribly fond of but is absolutely biblical and that is a church member must be willing to submit to church leadership. After instructing elders to keep watch over the flock of God, Peter addresses the flock, the church members, saying, “Likewise... be subject to the elders” (1 Peter 5:5). This call to submission is spelled out further in Hebrews 13:17 where believers are told to, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with

joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.” So as a member of a church, you are called to live in submission to the church leadership.

In order for elders to effectively lead, they need church members who are willing to follow their leadership, even if at times they do not agree. Let’s face it: submission is easy when you’re in agreement with those you are called to submit to; but it becomes difficult when you disagree and that is when submission becomes most important. Your willingness to submit to the God-given authorities in your life (including not only church elders but also in other realms such as citizens to government, employees to employers, and so on) is a reflection of your willingness ultimately to submit to God, under whom all earthly rulers and authorities have been established. God has given the church pastors and elders to help serve as under-shepherds of the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, and we should submit to them as we would submit ourselves to Christ.

Now it is important to say that while submission to church elders is clearly commanded in Scripture, it’s not a blank check demanding submission under any and every situation. If church leadership is unmistakably teaching false doctrine or engaging in or encouraging clearly sinful behavior, then a member should submit first to God and not follow a leader into false teaching or sinful practices. But if the matter is one simply of preferences, then the biblical teaching is that members should submit to church leadership, even if they differ on a particular point.

Sadly this requirement is too easily lost on us. We bring a consumeristic attitude to the church where we demand the church to fill our needs and meet our expectations, and if it doesn’t, we leave and go down the street to another church that will. Often times that is done for purely selfish and therefore sinful reasons. The biblical call to submit to your elders has real meaning for our lives especially when we do disagree. It is in those moments when the call to submit has real teeth, but sadly too often we act as if these verses don’t exist and leave a church for spurious reasons. Scripture is clear: church members are to submit to the elders of the local church they are a part of.

5. A church member must regularly gather for corporate worship.

Moving on now to the fifth requirement, a church member must regularly gather for corporate worship. If you’re a member of a church, you should be in regular attendance during those times when the church gathers corporately for worship. This is emphasized in Hebrews 10:25 where it says, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” Regularly meeting together for worship is the biblical standard set for the people of God.

By “regular attendance” it does not mean perfect attendance; certainly we recognize that families take vacations, people get sick, jobs require travel, etc. What is meant is that over the course of months and years, it’s your normal habit to gather with the rest of the church family for Sunday morning worship and communion services. While Scripture does not set any precise number as to what that means, it seems implied in the Hebrews passage quoted above that at minimum it would mean you’d be in attendance during

times of corporate worship more often than you would not. Obviously the notion of never attending at all or only on Christmas and Easter would not qualify as being in regular attendance at the church.

To clarify this a bit further, we also recognize that at times a member may experience a season where he or she is unable to be physically present for a lengthy period of time; for example, when one is serving in the military, or going off to college, or being bedridden due to a protracted illness, etc. We make provisions for such extenuating circumstances, recognizing that if such individuals could be in attendance they would be, but that their absence is only temporary until circumstances change.

The reason for this requirement is connected to what we talked about last week regarding the purpose of membership. It's almost impossible for the church to affirm your profession of faith if you're never here. Being part of the church community, doing life together with fellow believers, is part of what demonstrates the genuineness of your faith, as your words and actions are lived out before others. So membership in a church requires regular attendance within the church.

6. A church member must be willing to support the ministry of the church.

The sixth requirement for church members is they must be willing to support the ministry of the church. There are three primary ways they do this.

Time – Members should give of their time by attending essential church functions. Obviously that includes the major church gatherings, such as Sunday morning worship and communion. But even beyond that, we would expect church members do more than simply show up on Sunday morning. It would include involvement in other ministry related areas, such as attending the Annual Meeting, being involved in a Discipleship class or small group, or participating in other church-sponsored activities, just to name a few. While I wouldn't expect members to attend *every* activity of the church (that would be unrealistic!), I think it's reasonable to expect each member to have *some* level of committed involvement in the normal activities of the church.

Talents – Since God has blessed believers with various spiritual gifts to be used for the benefit of the church (1 Cor. 12:7), we should use those gifts to serve others in the church as good stewards of God's grace (1 Peter 4:10). Every member should be using their particular gifts, talents, and abilities to build up the Body of Christ. Barring those times in your life when for a season due to health or unavoidable life circumstances, if you are able to serve with your talents, you should be seeking out ways to do so.

Treasure – We expect members will practice the discipline of regular, generous, and cheerful giving. While we don't require an exact amount, Scripture often uses the tithe (10% of a person's income) as a starting point for giving. We hope our members will strive for the kind of joyful generosity in their giving that the apostle Paul praised the Corinthian church for in 2 Cor. 9:7, "Each person should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."

7. A church member must be devoted to praying for the church.

Finally, we expect that every member would regularly lift up the needs of the church in prayer. Believers in the early church devoted themselves to prayer (Acts 2:42; 4:31) and those prayers were specifically for the needs within that group of people whom they were a part of. So then, we'd expect members to pray for the pastors, elders, and all those who are in leadership in the church. Pray for the needs of fellow members. Pray that God would use GFC to be a light on a hill as we seek to spread the good news of Jesus Christ to our community. Remember that "the prayer of a righteous man (or woman!) is powerful and effective" (James 5:16). Church members should be committed to praying for and praying with others in their local church.

Conclusion:

As I said at the beginning, I could probably add more but I think seven is a good biblical number and so I think that's a worthwhile place to stop. These seven requirements are solid Scriptural expectations that I hope you see are important and, if you are a member here at Grace Fellowship, I hope you would be diligent in making these characterize your own involvement here. Membership in a church is not some honorary title bestowed upon you once upon a time that you get to keep perpetually no matter what you do; it's a living reality that places upon you expectations in the here and now. To be a member you must first and for most be a Christian, who is baptized, who is striving to live in obedience to Christ, who is willing to submit to church leadership, who attends regularly, who serves the church with his time, talents, and treasures, and who is committed to praying for the church. May those seven requirements be true of all of us here at Grace Fellowship, for the benefit of God's people and the glory of our God and Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Let's pray.

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