

## Church Membership

Today, personal commitment in any area of life is a rare commodity. Whether it is a commitment to marriage, employment, or dedication to personal self-discipline such as exercise, people are avoiding personal commitments. Given the climate of society, it should not be a surprise that church membership is a decreasing reality. It is not uncommon for Christians to move from church to church, never submitting to the care of Church leadership and never committing to a group of fellow believers.

To neglect church membership and refuse to commit to a local assembly reflects a misunderstanding of the believer's responsibility Christ has called to. To ignore this responsibility is to miss many opportunities for blessing. Both the individual believer and the corporate body lose out. Therefore, it is necessary for every Christian to understand what church membership is and why it matters.

First, we must recognize that the idea of formal membership where one is added to a list of believers for church membership is non-biblical. The Scriptures are silent as to any command such as "Thou shalt join a church". However, it is not unbiblical. We must distinguish the difference between "unbiblical" and "non-biblical". Unbiblical means that an action taken contradicts a clear biblical principle. A Non-biblical idea, on the other hand, simply means that it is not found in Scripture. Church membership would be in the category that is non-biblical, meaning that even though it cannot be found in Scripture, but it does not contradict a clear command or Biblical principle. This is important to note because the Bible offers freedom of expression in areas that are not specifically mentioned in Scripture. Even though Scripture does not contain an explicit command to formally join a local church, the biblical foundation for church membership permeates the New Testament. Church membership is simply a vehicle in which one expresses his or her intentions to fulfill the obligations Christ has commanded.

When one is saved, he automatically becomes a member of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). Because the individual is united to Christ, he is also united to other believers. In this way an individual is a member of the universal church. The Bible also stresses the need to commit oneself in a more visible and practical way. 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 and edifying 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 ordinances (Luke 22:19; Acts 2:38-42; 1 Cor. 11:23-26), and proclaiming the gospel to those who are lost (Matt. 28:18-20). In addition, when one becomes a member of a church, he submits himself to the care and the authority of the biblically qualified elder that God has placed in that assembly.

The biblical basis can be seen most clearly in (1) the example of the early church, (2) the existence of church government, (3) the exercise of church discipline, and (4) the exhortation of mutual edification.

The first basis for church membership may be found in the early church. In the first century, coming to Christ was coming to the church. The idea of experiencing salvation without belonging to a local church is foreign to the New Testament. Lone ranger Christianity is not a biblical principle. When in-

dividuals repented and believed in Christ, they were baptized and added to the church (Acts 2:41, 47; 5:14; 16:5). It was not a pattern for them to live in isolation in a private commitment to Christ, but they joined formally with other believers in a local assembly and devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer (Acts 2:42).

Second, the New Testament epistles were written to local churches. In the three cases where letters were written to individuals, they were leaders in local churches. This demonstrates that the Lord's plan was that believers would be committed to a local assembly.

Third, there is evidence that just as there was a list of widows eligible for financial support (1 Tim. 5:9), there may also have been a list of member that grew as people were saved. In Acts 2:41 we are told that "there were added that day about three thousand souls". Somehow they were counted and most likely their names were recorded for certain purposes. When a believer moved to another city, his church often wrote a letter of commendation to his new church (Acts 18:27). Paul wrote to the Romans to recognize Phoebe, "who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchræa." Other examples of letters recommending a member outside a congregation can be found in (Col. 4:10; 2 Cor. 3:1-2).

Evidence also exists that much of the terminology fits only 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), "in every church" (14:23), "the whole church" (15:17), and "the elders of the church" in Ephesus (20:17), all suggest recognizable church membership with well-defined boundaries (1 Cor. 5:4; 14:23; and Heb. 10:25).

A consistent pattern throughout the New Testament 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. These men are responsible to shepherd God's people (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2), to labor 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).

Those responsibilities necessitate that there be a distinguishable, mutually understood association in the local church. Elders can shepherd the people and give an account to God for their spiritual well-being only if they know who they are; they can provide oversight only if they know those for whom they are responsible; and they can fulfill their duty to shepherd the flock only if they know who is part of the flock and who is not.

The elders of a church are not responsible for the spiritual well-being of every individual who visits the church or who attends sporadically. Rather, they are primarily responsible to shepherd those who have voluntarily submitted themselves to the care and the authority of the elders. One primary way this can be accomplished is through church membership.

Scripture also teaches that believers are to submit to their elders. Hebrews 13:17 says, "Obey your

leaders, and submit to them.” The question for each believer is, “Who are your leaders?” The one who submits to the elders of a local church demonstrate that they have made those leaders “their” leaders. The one who refuses to join a local church and entrust himself to the care and authority of the elders really has no personal relationship to any spiritual leaders. For that person, obedience to Hebrews 13:17 is impossible. To put it simply, this verse implies that every believer knows to whom he must submit, which, in turn, assumes clearly defined church membership.

Another reason church membership is important is church discipline. In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus explains the way a church is to restore wayward believers who have fallen into sin. A four step process to cleans and maintain holiness. 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 then are to tell it to the church (v. 17). If there is still no repentance, the final step is to treat that person as an outsider (v. 17; 1 Cor. 5:1-13).

That 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. The elders of EastPointe Bible Church have neither the responsibility nor the authority to discipline a member of the church down the street. Experts suggest that due to the increase of law suits, churches should use caution to discipline those who have not agreed through membership to submit to such Biblical principles.

The last reason for church membership includes the command for mutual edification. Scripture teaches that the body of Christ has a responsibility of every individual to be devoted to the growth of the entire body. In other words, Scripture exhorts all believers to edify the other members by practicing the “one-another” of the New Testament (Heb. 10:24-25) and exercising their spiritual gifts (Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 12:4-7; 1 Pet. 4:10-11). Mutual edification can only take place in the context of committed and surrendered believers to a local church. Church membership is a tangible vehicle to express the commitment of believers to each other, to the elders, and ultimately to God.

Contrary to popular belief, much is expected of believers to a local assembly. Living out a commitment to a local church involves many responsibilities. It involves living a godly life, exercising one’s spiritual gifts in diligent service, contributing financially to the work of the ministry, and faithfully participating in corporate worship. Church membership is a practical way to stake one’s dedication to the Lordship of Christ.