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WHY JOIN A CHURCH?

by Kenneth Kantzer

"Why should I join the church?"

Despite my seminary training and pastoral experience, I was unprepared for this new Christian's question. He agreed from our study of the Scripture that he needed to identify himself as a disciple of Christ through baptism, but then he asked, "Can you show me from the New Testament that I'm supposed to *officially join* anything?"

Now he really had me.

"If I come and worship as often as the members," he continued, "if I fellowship with these believers as much as anyone else, if I profit from the teaching and other ministries of the church, and if I actively demonstrate love for my brothers and sisters in Christ here, why should I formally join the church?"

His question struck me with an uncomfortable logic. I began to realize that many of my conclusions about church membership were actually nothing more than previously unchallenged assumptions. These assumptions were now melting into questions of my own. Can I give reasons from Scripture why anyone should join a church? Did the Christians in New Testament times formally join churches or did they more of an informal relationship? Did the churches in the days of the Apostle Paul have a membership list? How do I respond to the rising tide of opinion that says church membership is merely an unchallenged, but unbiblical tradition and an unnecessary formality?

Here's what I found.

BIBLICAL INDICATIONS OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

To start with, we encounter the word *church* throughout the New Testament. In the great majority of instances the term refers to a specific local church like that in Rome or Corinth. Sometimes when we read of the church the reference is to what's often called the church universal, that is, all Christians everywhere. But when you read "church" in the Bible, it almost always means "local church."

At the very least, the local church was the fellowship of the followers of Jesus Christ in a particular area. We know that they met together, worshiped together, prayed together etc., as the born-again family of God. But did people actually join this fellowship in some official way, or was it a mutually-assumed and less formal association?

The practice of keeping a list of widows makes sense in the context of membership

We know that churches in the days of the Apostle Paul made and maintained at least one type of list. "No widow may be put on the list of widows," Paul instructs Timothy, "unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband," etc., (1 Timothy 5:9, NIV). As easily as the churches had lists of widows, they could have had lists of members. There would be no difference except for length for a church to keep a widows' list and a membership list.

The instructions for church discipline make sense only in the context of membership

In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus gave us instructions on how the church should respond when someone within the church persists in living like an unbeliever. We read of a specific case of this in 1 Corinthians 5 and how the Apostle Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, instructed the Christians in the church at Corinth to handle it. In verses 11-13 Paul says, "But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner-not even to eat with such a person. For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore 'put away from yourselves the evil person.'"

There was a sexually immoral man in this church. Was Paul simply telling them not to let this man come to church with them because he was acting like an unbeliever instead of a Christian? No, he couldn't have meant that, for we know from other places in this letter (cf. 14:24-25) that unbelievers were welcome to attend church meetings. Even when they obeyed Paul's instructions to "put away from yourselves the evil person" and considered the man an unbeliever, they would have allowed (even welcomed) him to come and sit under the preaching of God's Word like any other person in town. So in what sense would they have "put away" ("remove"-NASB, "expel"-NIV) this man?

The best way of explaining how they would have "put away" this man is to understand that they removed him from the membership of the church and generally stopped associating with him outside the church meetings.

Notice that Paul refers to those who are "inside" and to those who are "outside." Outside of what? As we've noted, anyone could attend their meetings. This kind of language can only refer to a definite church membership of converted people. For what authority does a group have to remove someone who is already "outside" and not a member of the group? You can't fire someone who doesn't work for you. You can't vote in your country to remove a government official elected by another country. You can't appeal to a court to discipline someone who isn't within its jurisdiction. In the same way, you can't formally discipline someone who is in an informal relationship with you; you have no authority to do so. These people in Corinth had voluntarily committed themselves to a formal relationship and they knew who were official members of the church and who were "outside."

Church discipline must be done by the "church" (Matthew 18:17) and occur "when you are gathered together" (1 Corinthians 5:4). Who is to gather together? How do you know who the "church" is? How do you determine who does and does not have the right to speak and vote on such matters? Does the person subject to discipline have the liberty to bring in his

extended family or coworkers who have never been to the church, or even people off the street, and expect them to be given an equal say with those who have been faithful to the church for years? No? Why not? Do you exclude them from involvement because they've never been part of the church? Then what about the person who attended once five years ago? Or those who came at Easter and Christmas last year? Or those who regularly watch the church services on television or listen to them on the radio, and perhaps even send money, but never enter the building? Or those from distant cities who visit several times each year because of family members in the church? Obviously, Biblical church discipline must be limited to a specific group and that must mean the church *members*.

The meaning of the word "join" in Acts. 5:13 makes sense only in the context of membership

In Acts 5:13 we read of the reaction of the non-Christians in Jerusalem after a couple within the church, Ananias and Sapphira, had died on the spot when it was revealed that they had lied to the church. It says, "Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly." The unbelievers had great respect for the Christians, but after this incident none of them who claimed to be converted but were outward-only believers wanted to join the church.

In the Greek language in which Paul wrote this letter, the word he used that's translated here as "join" literally means "to glue or cement together, to unite, to join firmly." It doesn't refer to an informal, merely assumed sort of relationship, but one where you choose to "glue" or "join" yourself firmly to the others. Again, that kind of language only makes sense in the context of membership.

That same "glue word" is used in the New Testament to describe being joined together in a sexual relationship (1 Corinthians 6:16) and being joined to the Lord in one spirit in salvation (1 Corinthians 6:17). And it's the very same word Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 5:11 when he says "not to keep company with" any so-called brother who continues in immorality, but rather to "put away from yourselves the evil person." Clearly this kind of language doesn't refer to a casual, superficial, or informal relationship.

So when it says in Acts 5:13 that no insincere believer "dared join them," the "glue word" used there speaks of such a cohesive, bonding relationship that it must be referring to a recognized church membership.

The meaning of "the whole church" in 1 Corinthians 14:23 makes sense only in the context of membership

The Apostle Paul wrote to this new body of Christians about their many difficulties, including how to bring order to their public worship. He began 1 Corinthians 14:23 with, "Therefore if the whole church comes together in one place," Who did he have in mind when he referred to "the whole church"? The only realistic answer is "the church members." That's why one commentator, working with the original language of this text, translates it "If then the whole church assembles together and all *its members*" [emphasis mine] and notes "(the last two words are not in the Greek but are naturally to be understood)."1

Imagine the leaders of the Corinthian Christians walking into the gathering of the church for worship one Sunday. Would they have known by looking, or would they have had some way of deciding, whether "the whole church" was there? Surely they would have known who was supposed to be present in a church wide meeting and who was missing. But how else could they have known when "the whole church" was "together in one place" without knowing who was a member and who wasn't? This implies a verifiable membership.

The instructions for pastoral oversight and spiritual leadership make sense only in the context of membership

"This is a faithful saying:" said Paul to Timothy, "If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work" (1 Timothy 3:1). In other places the New Testament also refers to a bishop, or "overseer" as the NIV and NASB render it, as a pastor or elder (Acts 20:17, 28; Philippians 1:1; Titus 1:5-7). But what or whom does he oversee? How can he provide spiritual oversight if he doesn't know exactly those for whom he is responsible? A distinguishable, mutually-understood membership is required for him to fulfill his charge.

Down in verse 5 it says of an overseer, "For if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?" The local church is compared to a family. Is anyone a casual member of a family? No, membership in a family is a very definite thing.

"Take heed to yourselves," Paul instructed the elders of the church of Ephesus "and to all the flock" (Acts 20:28). How could they fulfill their responsibility as under shepherds to "all" the flock unless they knew who was part of "the flock" and who was not? These leaders of a growing church in a large city needed some means of identification of those for whom they were to "take heed." A simple membership list is the logical solution.

In Hebrews 13:17 is a word addressed to those under such overseers: "Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you." For whom will the leaders of a church give an account-everyone who comes in and out of their church services? No, it has to be a limited group of people-the members of the church-for whom they will be answerable. Otherwise, how can church leaders be responsible for someone until they know he or she is committed to their care? The Bible's instructions for pastoral oversight and spiritual leadership can best be obeyed when there is a well-defined church membership.

The metaphors used to describe local churches (flock, temple, body, household) make sense only in the context of membership

The New Testament uses several metaphors to describe churches. Some of these metaphors describe the church of Christ collectively throughout the world. While all of them could potentially apply to the local church also, at least four of these metaphors-flock, temple, body, and household-are definitely used to refer to individual churches (in Acts 20:28;

Ephesians 2:21; 1 Corinthians 12:27, and 1 Timothy 3:15). And each metaphor is best understood in a setting of specific church membership.

A *flock* of sheep isn't a random collection of ewes, rams, and lambs. Shepherds know their flocks. They know which sheep are theirs to care for and which are not. Sheep belong to specific flocks. This is also the way it should be for God's spiritual sheep. A *temple* building, just like a church building, shouldn't have any loose bricks or blocks. If it does, something's wrong. Each one of them has a definite place. "There is no place," said an English preacher long ago, "for any loose stone in God's edifice."² The same analogy is true for a human *body*. Your body isn't a casual collection of loosely related parts. You don't keep your fingers in your pocket until you need them. They are joined. They are members of the body. The local body of Christ should be like this also—those joined to Christ, who are members of His body—should express that relationship through a visible membership. And in a *household*, a family, you're either a member or you're not. So if you are part of the family of God, show it by joining a local expression of God's family.

British pastor Eric Lane sees additional significance in this quartet of metaphors:

God has given us four pictures of the church, not one. This is not just to emphasize and prove the point by repetition, but also to say four different things about what it means to be a member of a church. To be a stone in his temple means to belong to a worshipping community. To be part of a body means to belong to a living, functioning, serving, witnessing community. To be a sheep in the flock means belonging to a community dependent on him for food, protection, and direction. To be a member of a family is to belong to a community bound by a common fatherhood. Put together you have the main functions of an individual Christian. Evidently we are meant to fulfill these not on our own but together in the church. Now can you see the answer to the question why you should join a church? 3

We've just seen five Biblical indications that New Testament churches had membership lists of some sort. They knew who was a member and who was not. When people became followers of Jesus, or when followers of Jesus moved to another town, they formally identified themselves with a local church—they joined it. "In the New Testament there is no such person as a Christian who is not a church member," writes Douglas G. Millar. Conversion was described as 'the Lord adding to the church' (Acts 2:47). There was no spiritual drifting."⁴

...

If you are presently a member of the local church you attend, you should exercise your spiritual gifts in and through that church (see Romans 12:5-6a). Membership implies commitment and activity. All the living parts of the body of Christ should be working and fulfilling their God-intended function.

Think about this: a member of a human body, such as a heart or kidney, cannot exist apart from the body, except by some temporary and artificial sustenance. But this isn't what it's designed for. In this sheer existence the organ doesn't fulfill its function in the body. It isn't nourished in the way God intended through the body, but subsists only through some synthetic way that provides mere maintenance but doesn't stimulate growth or development.

...

In the same way, a true member of Christ's body is *not designed* to operate independently or outside the body. An authentic part of Christ's spiritual body cannot be content while separated from the rest of His earthly body. That's because he or she is made for interdependence, not independence.

As wonderful and sophisticated as the heart is, it was never made to be just a heart, but a *part of a body*. It has no value to the body outside the body. And the heart itself can't thrive outside the body. As incredible and wonderful as you are, Christian, you were never made just to be an individual Christian, but a *part of body*. As every organ and every cell is God-created to be an active member of the human body, so every true Christian is God-created to be an active member of a local body of Christ.

Are *you* a true Christian? Are you an actively and Biblically involved member of a local body of Christ? "Belonging to the church," says John MacArthur, "is at the very heart of Christianity."⁹

Church membership involves many responsibilities, but we must never lose sight of the great privilege that it really is. "We must grasp once again," said Martin Lloyd-Jones of London in the mid-twentieth century, "the idea of church membership as being the membership of the body of Christ and as the biggest honor which can come a man's way in this world."¹⁰

1 C. K. Barrett, A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 324.

2 Joseph Hall, as quoted in John Blanchard, More Gathered Gold (Welwyn, England: Evangelical Press, 1986), p. 43.

3 G. Eric Lane, I Want to Be A Church Member (Bryntirion, Wales: Evangelical Press of Wales, 1992), p. 21.

4 Douglas G. Millar, "Should I Join A Church?" The Banner of Truth, Issue 62, Nov. 1968, p. 21.

9 John MacArthur sermon, tape GC 80-130.

10 D. Martin Lloyd-Jones, Knowing the Times (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1989), p. 30.