

Towards a Biblical Understanding of Church Membership

The “Church” and “Churches”.

The Church – in its broadest but much less frequently used definition.

"The church is the community of all true believers for all time"

W. A. Grudem

"The church of Christ, in its largest signification, is the whole company of regenerate persons in all times and ages, in heaven and on earth"

A. H. Strong

"The total people of God spread through all the ages, the total company of the elect. The Reformers spoke of this as the invisible church. "

Bruce Milne

"... the word in its most comprehensive meaning signifies the whole body of faithful, whether in heaven or earth, who have been or shall be united to Christ as their Savior. "

Louis Berkhof

Ephesians 5:25, 27, 29, 32 ²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,... ²⁷ so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish... ²⁹ For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church,... ³² This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

Galatians 1:13 For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it.

1 Corinthians 15:9 For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

Acts 9:31 So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.

Hebrews 12:23 and to the assembly¹ (or church) of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,

Colossians 1:18 And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.

Ephesians 1:22-23 ²² And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

The Churches / Local Church – In its more commonly used concept. This is a reference to an assembly in distinctive regions, locations and meeting places. It consists of all of those who have made a profession of faith and repentance signifying such by baptism. All ‘saints’, converts, Christians are expected to be members of a local church. (Romans 12:4ff; 1 Cor. 12:25, 27)

Acts 15:41 And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Acts 13:1 Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger,¹ Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.

Acts 14:23 And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Romans 16:5 Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaphroditus, who was the first convert¹ to Christ in Asia.

2 Thessalonians 1:4 Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring.

Revelation 1:4 John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne

Let’s consider what a local church is not:

...a loose affiliation of people who hold roughly the same religious beliefs, no matter what those beliefs might be. I’m not joining a religious club when I join a church.

...a building. A building is simply a place to meet. I’m not going to an exclusive clubhouse when I go to church.

...it is not a religious organization or denominations such as the ‘Anglican Church’, ‘Catholic Church’, ‘Presbyterian Church’ etc...

...a non-profit organization with a clear vision statement and lucid objectives. I’m not joining an altruistic, social or philanthropic society when I join a church.

What a local church is: *initial considerations...*

...an assembly of people who profess and give evidence that they have been saved by God’s grace alone, for His glory alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

...a local, living and loving collection of people who are committed to Christ and committed to each other in accordance with the Word of God in faith, practice and order.

Important questions to test if we are markedly mistake (dangerously deceived, catastrophically confused, fatally faulty) in our understanding of the Church and Church Membership.

- Do you or any professing Christians you know treat local church membership, commitment and responsibility as optional?
- Do you or any professing Christians you know think that they can go wherever they want to “Church” on any given Sunday, as long as they go somewhere?
- Do you or any professing Christians you know think that they are to submit and be accountable ONLY to Christ?
- Do you or any professing Christians you know think that irregular local church attendance is not an indication of one’s personal spiritual condition?

If you (or another you know) answered yes to any of these questions then there are some very important biblical corrections that need to be made.

A believer / Christian without church membership is like a fire without flames, a fish without water, a bird without wings, a key without a lock, shoes without feet...impossible or ineffectual and most importantly unbiblical.

The Bible clearly teaches both the reality and responsibility of church membership. When the Scriptures are carefully studied, we can see that specific lists of names and numbers; descriptions and distinctions; inclusions and exclusions directly and expressly stated.

Names and numbers

^{KJV} **Acts 1:15** And in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples, and said, (the **number of names together** were about an hundred and twenty,) [ὄχλος ὀνομάτων ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό]

^{ESV} **Acts 2:41** So those who received his word were baptized, and there were **added** that day about three thousand souls.

^{ESV} **Acts 2:44** And all who believed **were together** and had all things in common. [ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό]

^{ESV} **Acts 2:47** praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord **added to their number** day by day those who were being saved. [προσέτιθει τοὺς σωζόμενους καθ’ ἡμέραν ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό.]

Acts 6:2-3 ² And the twelve summoned the **full number of the disciples** and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. ³ Therefore, brothers,¹

pick out **from among you** seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty.

Descriptions and distinctions:

^{ESV} **Acts 11:26** and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with **the church** and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.

^{ESV} **Acts 14:23** And when they had appointed **elders for them in every church**, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed... **27** And when they arrived and **gathered the church together**, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.

^{ESV} **Acts 20:28-30** ²⁸ Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all **the flock**, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.² ²⁹ I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come **in among you**, not sparing **the flock**; ³⁰ and from **among your own selves** will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.

1 Peter 5:2-3 ² shepherd **the flock of God that is among you**, exercising oversight,¹ not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you;² not for shameful gain, but eagerly; ³ not domineering over **those in your charge**, but being examples to **the flock**.

^{ESV} **James 5:13-14** ¹³ Is anyone **among you** suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. ¹⁴ Is anyone **among you** sick? Let him call for the elders of **the church**, and let them pray over him...

Inclusions and exclusions.

1 Corinthians 5:1-2, 7, 12-13 It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality **among you**, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. ² And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be **removed from among you**... ⁷ Cleanse out the old leaven that **you** may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed... ¹² For what have I to do with judging **outsiders**? Is it not **those inside the church** whom you are to judge? ¹³ God judges¹ those outside. "Purge the evil person from **among you**."

1 Corinthians 1:10-11 ¹⁰ I appeal to you, brothers,¹ by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that **all of you agree** and that there be no divisions **among you**, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. ¹¹ For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling **among you, my brothers**.

Romans 12:3-5 ³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone **among you** not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, **each** according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴ For as in one body we have many members,¹ and the members do not all have the same function, ⁵ so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and **individually members one of another**.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 12:12** For just as ^athe body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, ^bso it is with Christ... ¹⁸ But as it is, ^aGod arranged the members in the body, each one of them, ^bas he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many parts,¹ yet one body.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 12:25-27** ²⁵ that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, ^aall rejoice together. ²⁷ Now ^ayou are the body of Christ and individually ^bmembers of it.

1 Timothy 5:9, 11, 16 ⁹ Let a widow **be enrolled** if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband,... ¹¹ But **refuse to enroll** younger widows, for when their passions draw them away from Christ,... ¹⁶ If any believing woman has relatives who are widows, let her care for them. Let **the church** not be burdened, so that it may care for those who are really widows.

Responsibilities (some...)

1 Peter 4:10 As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace:...

Hebrews 10:24-27 ²⁴ And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together [τὴν ἐπισυναγωγὴν ἑαυτῶν] NASV - not forsaking our own assembling together], as is the habit of some, but encouraging **one another**, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. ²⁶ For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷ but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.

NOTE: The specifying phrase marking out a recognizable and distinctive group of individual members “one another” appears in this “local church” context 59 times in 51 verses in the N.T. Epistles.

Hebrews 13:7; 17 Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith... ¹⁷ 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.