

Towards a Biblical Understanding of Church Membership

Part 2

In the previous lesson we noted that though the phrase “Church Membership” is not stated in the Scriptures the concept is clearly taught and even at times speaks with the underlying assumption that the readers of the epistles understand their connection to and role within the local church membership.

We noted several things:

- **Names and numbers** related to the local assembly and it’s growth
- **Descriptions and distinctions** such as the terms – “Flock” (which includes specific numbers of sheep and names of them), “Those in your charge” (noting that the Elders/Pastors should know specifically and distinctly who they are responsible for), “among you” (noting a clear, recognizable and community with distinctive attachment/membership), etc.
- **Inclusions and exclusions** – with such clear terminology as “inside the church” and “outsiders”, and “removed from among you (the church, local flock membership – the process of church discipline requires membership recognition for both inclusion and exclusion/excommunication), the each individual member as a part of the body, and the sub-registers of widow enrollment etc.
- **Roles and Responsibilities** – in a brief overview we noted that the commitment and service to “one another” is repeatedly used in the NT local church context and crucial commands such as “obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account...” require clear recognition by the believers as to who their leaders are and clear recognition by the leaders as to who they are accountable for – this demands a context for association with recognition and mutual commitments.

Now that we have seen the clear Biblical mandate for church membership and some of the primary texts denoting membership responsibility, let’s take a practical look at church membership. Noting as we did last week in the lesson that “joining” or “becoming a member” of the local church during the Apostolic age was through Baptism (confessing of sin in repentance, professing faith in Christ and a full hope and identity with Him and all that are His)

Now let’s consider some of the practical outworkings of these things in a local church context. Since we have multiple local churches with distinctive doctrinal commitments, church government patterns and congregational leaders what does my membership mean?

What Does Church Membership Signify?

- **Church membership signifies a church's corporate recognition of a person's profession of *FAITH*.**
- **Church membership signifies an individual commitment to grasp hold of one another in mutual love and discipleship.**
 - By identifying ourselves with a particular local church, we let the pastors/elders and other members know that we intend to be committed in attendance, giving, prayer and service.
 - We increase others' expectations of us in these areas, and we make it known that we are the responsibility of this local church. We assure the church of our commitment to Christ in serving with them, and we call for their commitment to serve us in love and to encourage us in our discipleship.
 - In short, we enter a 'covenant' relationship with that church and its leadership.
- **Church Membership signifies a regular responsibility that involves people in each other's lives for the purposes of the Gospel, the glory of God and the good of others, especially the household of faith.**
 - Church membership should not be viewed as a loose affiliation useful to members on some occasions. This is a self-centered way of looking at membership. It says, "I want to join this club for the benefits that it can offer me. But as soon as it starts demanding more than I feel I'm receiving, I think I'll start looking around."
 - Church membership is not a set of rights that I purchase with my giving. It is a set of responsibilities that I commit myself to carrying out, both for and with other members in Christian fellowship, work and joy.
- **Church Membership signifies an inward love for God and His people.**
 - By joining ourselves with God's people in local church membership, we show that we want to covenant with them to help and be helped, encourage and be encouraged, rebuke and be rebuked. In other words, we show that we want to love God's people, and be loved by them.
 - According to 1 John, this willingness to love God's people is the fundamental indicator of our heart's disposition toward God Himself. **1 John 4:20-21** ²⁰ If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love

his brother whom he has seen cannot¹ love God whom he has not seen. ²¹ And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

What are the Criteria for Church Membership?

- ✓ **A Credible Profession of Faith, Repentance and Regeneration.** Churches should be careful to allow only those who appear to be genuine believers into the covenant of church membership. Why?
 - Because of who the church is.
 - By definition, the church is the gathered people of God. Those who are not a part of that people are welcome as visitors. But membership in a local church only belongs rightly to those who already belong to God by faith in His Son Jesus Christ.
 - Unregenerate members do not share the same spiritual DNA as Christians. Infusing the church with their blood will lead to complications, infection and potential fatality.
 - Because of how the church operates.
 - **Ephesians 4:15-16** ¹⁵ Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.
 - The growth of the body comes from Christ. But Christ causes that growth through the instrumental working of each individual part – the members. Unregenerate members therefore do not contribute to the growth of the body because they have no proper function in it.
 - Because of the covenant (commitment/pact/agreement) that membership signifies.
 - To enter church membership is to enter into a covenant with the other members and the pastors/elders. It is a commitment to being meaningfully involved in the lives of other members to do them good, especially spiritually.
 - In limiting membership to Christians, we are protecting the flock from being infiltrated by wolves in sheep's clothing, and removing wolves and false sheep/goats from our midst.

✓ We look for Observable Fruit

- **Matthew 7:15-20** ¹⁵ "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. (See also John 15:1-11; Gal. 5:22-23; James 2:14-26; 2 Pet. 1:4-11; 1 John 3:10)
- Emotions ebb. Expressiveness in worship can be merely external, cultural or personality related. Clarity in talking about spiritual things has been achieved by many unconverted. Being entrusted with responsibilities or positions in the church does not necessarily imply godliness. And the use of apparently spiritual gifts can be fatally deceptive (Matt. 7:21-23)
- Increasing conformity to God's character is the only sure yardstick with which to measure the genuineness of Christian confession – selfless service, devoted duty, hunger for the Word of God and fellowship with the people of God, commitment to Christ and His church.

What are the Entailments of Church Membership

✓ Repentance and Belief

- The most important entailment of local church membership is a lifestyle of repentance and belief. One must make a genuine commitment to consistently repent of known sin as it occurs, and to continually believe in Jesus' death and resurrection as the only basis of acquittal before God.
- More specifically, the lifestyle of repentance and belief should be evidenced in three concrete steps.
 - **Baptism.** This is the first way that we are commanded to express our faith union with Christ's death and resurrection. (Matt. 28:19-20)
 - **Statement of Faith.** We are a people who are united in a common faith, having the same mind and same purposes (1 Cor. 1:10; Phil. 2:2) as well as the biblical basics and basis from which to distinguish wolves among us.

- For this reason, it is healthy to require people to sign the church's statement of faith. This way, everyone knows what the church is united around, and doctrinal division is less likely to occur.
- **Church Covenant.** We unite around common commitments and the lifestyle demanded by the message we claim to believe, the Scriptures. It is important that those who are to submit to their leaders (Heb. 13:17) and serve and hold one another accountable publically, verbally commit to this Biblical calling. Why would any true believer be unwilling to verbally and publically commit themselves to the very things that God has called us to in Christ? We must covenant together! Further for legal purposes of stewardship and responsibility a written membership protects the congregation and its leaders from disgruntled disciplined former members.
- This way, everyone knows what it means to be a member (*Christian*), what is expected of them when they join, and when they are falling short of fulfilling their obligations as member (*Christians*).

Five Basic Responsibilities of Membership

- ✓ **Attend Faithfully.** If we don't attend, we can't be edified, serve one another, submit to the leadership. If you are not consistently present at meetings there is disparity in the growth, perspectives etc. The flock feeds together and grows together. Also...It is commanded by God (Heb. 10:24-26)
- ✓ **Give Regularly.** If we don't give, the financial responsibilities of the church suffer, the work of the ministry is hindered and our participation in the gospel endeavor limited.
- ✓ **Pray Regularly.** One of the most basic ways we can edify and encourage one another towards greater obedience, holiness, and joy is through prayer.
- ✓ **Participate in the Lord's Table.** It is an ordinance commanded by the Lord for our joy in and remembrance of Him. It binds us together as a believing community, and reminds us of the significance of Christ's death.
- ✓ **Serve on another & Submit to your Elders/Pastors.** We come together now merely for ourselves but to serve one another on behalf of Christ. We should understand that the Elders take much pains and prayer in the preparation for the spiritual feeding and directions of the flock entrusted to them. They have the hard duty of calling and urging all the sheep to faithfulness and wayward and wandering sheep are a distraction that hopefully you do not want to cause. Pray for them and encourage them as they seek to do the same for you.