



THE  
MENTORING  
PROJECT

# CHURCH MEMBERSHIP: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE



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## CHURCH MEMBERSHIP



# INTRODUCTION

I wonder what you think about the topic of church membership. If I had to guess, you find it a little boring. Even the words themselves — “church membership” — feel institutional or bureaucratic.

Or maybe your concerns are graver. You wonder if church membership in the Bible gives people an excuse to be intrusive. Jesus said he came to set us free. But doesn’t church membership tell Christians to stick their noses into one another’s business? Now you’re being asked to read a field guide on this institutional and maybe intrusive topic. Perhaps you’re not thrilled at this prospect?

Perhaps it will help if I start by being honest myself: I don’t always like being a church member, either. And I’ve written a couple of books on the topic! Sometimes I want to be left alone. I don’t want to be bothered with other people or their problems or their opinions. Sometimes my heart doesn’t want to serve them.

Maybe you know what this feels like. Our lives are already busy. The spouse and kids take a lot of time. So do our jobs. Do we really need to worry about the folks at church? They don’t have a claim on our time, do they? This tension often makes us overlook the importance of church community.

If we’re being really honest, we might admit to having darker instincts play a role, too (I confess that’s true for me). We like our independence, and independence doesn’t like accountability. The old man in us can desire to live in the dark, unseen and anonymous. And living in the dark lets you come and go as you please, it lets you do what you want, and it keeps you from unwelcome eyes or awkward conversations. Yet, spiritual protection

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and accountability in church are exactly what we need to guard against those instincts.

Then there is the inevitable fact that our churches are not perfect, and some far from it. Our fellow church members can be rude, or emotionally demanding, or just boring. Some don't appreciate you and the things you do to serve them. Some sin against you in more dramatic ways.

Our pastors can fail us, too. They don't call us when they say they will (which I've done). They don't remember our names or our kids' names (I've also done this). Sometimes they make bad decisions or say dumb things from the pulpit (again, guilty). Perhaps most distressing is when pastors disqualify themselves from their office through moral failure. They can be harsh or demeaning. They can hurt people. When this happens, we might struggle with the concept of spiritual authority and the local believer.

It's easy to use exalted theological language about our churches, as when we refer to them as "embassies of heaven," which is a phrase I'll use in this field guide. An embassy of heaven sounds glorious, doesn't it? You almost picture a huddle of people glowing with a heavenly light. Yet — in the interest of being transparent — too often our churches don't feel that way. A few are "bad." Most are simply ordinary, prosaic, a little boring, like no big deal. So what value is there in calling them embassies of heaven, and why formal church membership matters in such ordinary settings?

All that to say, it's no good to talk about churches and church membership in heavenly terms unless we're going to set them in the context of these earthly realities. Because whatever what is a local church biblically, it has to account for both heaven and earth.

# 1

## IS CHURCH MEMBERSHIP IN THE BIBLE?<sup>1</sup>

The first question Christians should always ask about a doctrine or practice is, “is it biblical?”

If given only thirty seconds on an elevator to answer that question, one could point to Biblical passages on church discipline. For instance, Paul writes to the church in Corinth, “Shouldn’t you be filled with grief and remove from your congregation the one who did this?” (1 Cor. 5:2, italics mine). And a moment later: “For what business is it of mine to judge outsiders? Don’t you judge those who are inside? God judges outsiders. Remove the evil person from among you” (1 Cor. 5:12–13; see also Matt. 18:17; Titus 3:10). A church cannot “remove” a person from the “inside” unless there is an inside to be removed from. This highlights the importance of church discipline as a necessary function of a defined community.

Alternatively, one could point to any number of Scriptures on belonging to a church in the book of Acts that describe people being added to a church or gathering as a church:

- “So those who accepted [Peter’s] message were baptized, and that day about three thousand people were added to them” (Acts 2:41).
- “Then great fear came on the whole church...They were all together in Solomon’s Colonnade. No one else dared to join them, but the people spoke well of them” (Acts 5:11, 12b–13).
- “The Twelve summoned the whole company of the disciples” (Acts 6:2).

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To whom were the 3,000 “added”? Who is the “them” in Acts 2 and 5? The church in Jerusalem, who gathered in Solomon’s Portico and who could be summoned by the twelve apostles. They could number them, which means they could name them. Whether the church recorded those 3,000 names on a computer spreadsheet or piece of parchment, who knows. But they knew who “they” were. This forms a clear Biblical basis for church membership.

Or, one could find a prooftext for membership by pointing to the rest of the New Testament and how the role of local church in the New Testament identifies specific, concrete groups of people as a church. John, for instance, writes to “the church in Ephesus” and “the church in Smyrna” and “the church in Pergamum” (Rev. 2:1, 8, 12). The members of the church in Ephesus were not the members of the church in Smyrna, while the members of the church in Smyrna were not the members in Pergamum, and so forth. Paul, likewise, writes the “church of God at Corinth” and offers them instructions for when “you are assembled” or tells them “to wait for one another” when taking the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 1:2; 5:4; 11:33). Again, they knew who “they” were. So it is with every named church in the New Testament.

### ***Defining Church Membership***

The next question is, “what is church membership?” If I asked you, what would you say? I believe you will answer that question differently based on your view of what a church is. If you think of the church as merely a spiritual benefits provider for individuals, then your view of church membership will look like membership in a shopper’s club or a gym. Come and go as you please. You’re in control. Figure out which programs work best for your spiritual growth. Trained professionals will help you set goals and meet them. Of course, the more you show up, the more benefits of church membership for the believer you’ll reap.

If, instead, you think of church as a family, membership will feel more like the relationships of brothers and sisters. Everyone shares in the family identity and in the family work of care and love. Everyone is called to give love and receive love. And love comes in many forms. Sometimes it comes as encouragement, sometimes as correction. Almost always love involves

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time. When church is a family, membership involves spending time with other members throughout the week, not just on Sundays.

The interesting thing is, the Bible uses a host of images for describing a church. Jesus and the apostles describe the church as a family, a body, a temple, a flock, a bride, and more. Each of these images contributes something to a deeper understanding of what church membership is. In other words, church membership will involve the shared identity and mutual care of belonging to a family. It will involve the dependence experienced by different parts of a body, like the shoulder to the arm and arm to shoulder. It will entail helping one another represent God's holiness like bricks in the temple. And so on.

Add all those biblical images together and you quickly realize membership in a church isn't quite like anything else. It's not the same thing as club membership or gym membership or union membership or any other form of membership.

Still, you wonder, is there a concise way to define church membership? Let's start with this definition: church membership is the formal commitment that baptized Christians make with one another both to identify themselves as Christians and to help each other follow Jesus by regularly gathering together for preaching and the Supper.

That's not everything church membership is, but it's a basic skeletal structure. Notice the three parts of this definition, which help explain the covenant of church membership explained below:

- It's a formal commitment between baptized Christians. That's the noun. It's what membership is: a mutual commitment. Sometimes churches use the word "covenant" to describe that commitment.
- It's a commitment to do what? To do two things: publicly identify each other as Christians and help one another grow and endure in the faith. This is part of growing in Christ through the local church.
- And it's a commitment to do those things how? By regularly gathering together for preaching and receiving the Supper.

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As I said, that's the skeletal structure on which we place the muscle and flesh of the different images mentioned previously. We commit to helping one another live as a family, grow as a body, stand as a temple, and so on.

Who can join a church? Anyone who repents of their sins, trusts in Christ, and obeys Jesus' command to be baptized. Church membership is not for unbelievers, for the children of believers, or for any believer who has not been baptized. It is for baptized believers — members of the new covenant who submit to being formally recognized in Jesus' name.

How can a person join a church? Different cultural settings allow for different practices. In a Western context beset by Christian nominalism and many false Christs, a wise church will probably include practices like membership classes and interviews. These allow a church to know what an individual believes, and the individual to know what a church believes. At the very least, the biblical minimum involves (i) a conversation that asks those questions, like Jesus asking the apostles, "Who do you say that I am?" (Matt. 16:15); and (ii) a commitment or agreement or covenant by which individuals bind and are bound (Matt. 18:18–20). This helps a person answer the question, "how to find a church for me?"

How can a person leave a church? The short answer is, by death, by joining another gospel-preaching church, or by church discipline, which we'll discuss below. From the kingdom perspective, church membership is not voluntary. Christians must join churches. The Bible leaves no room for fading away or resigning "into the world," as an older generation put it.

Finally, what is the responsibility of a church member? We'll devote a whole section to this topic in a moment, but the quick answer is that members must work to make disciples. This includes sharing the gospel, protecting the gospel from false versions of it, recognizing new members in the gospel, protecting and correcting one another in the gospel, and building one another up in the gospel. This is precisely why you need a local church home.

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### ***Discussion & Reflection:***

1. In what ways did this section challenge your views of church membership?
2. Can you articulate how church membership is a biblical concept and not merely a prudential one?

## 2

# WHAT IS A CHURCH?

I said above that our view of church membership depends upon our view of what a church is. So what is a church?

I'll start with another skeletal-structure answer that will sound a lot like the definition of membership offered above: *What is a local church biblically? A church is a group of Christians who have covenanted together as Christ-followers and kingdom citizens by regularly gathering together for preaching the Bible and by affirming that covenant with one another through the ordinances.*

The definition of church membership and the definition of a church are close to one another because *a church is its members.*

Let me explain that last sentence with an illustration I often use. Imagine you're on a cruise ship somewhere in tropical waters. It strikes a coral reef and sinks, but the several thousand passengers manage to climb onto the deserted island right where it sank. Days go by. You find a Bible washed up on shore and begin reading it sitting there on the sand. Several other survivors see you reading, approach you, and ask if you're a Christian. You say you are and explain the gospel of Jesus Christ. They say they agree with that same gospel and then explain it in their own words. You all agree on who Jesus is and on what he's done. All of you are excited to have found fellow Christians.

At that point, one person of the group says he found some grapes on the island, which he can turn into grape juice or wine. Then, all of you agree, for as long as you remain on the island, to begin meeting once a week to teach the Bible to one another and to take the Lord's Supper with your island juice. You also agree to share this gospel with other cruise ship survivors and to baptize in the beautiful turquoise ocean waters anyone who repents and believes.

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What is your little group now? Poof — you're a church, and you're all members of it. By counting one another as members, you become a church. Or, to say it the other way around, the church exists in its membership. A church is its members. This is the biblical basis for church membership.

To become a church, Christians don't need the blessing of a bishop. They don't need the elaborate structures of a presbytery. They don't even require the presence of a pastor. After their first missionary journey, for instance, Paul and Barnabas took a second journey in which they returned to churches they planted on their first journey and appointed elders (Acts 14:23). Paul told Titus to do the same thing with the churches he left behind on the island of Crete (Titus 1:5). In other words, these churches were planted and continued to exist without pastors, at least for a season. One lesson for us: pastors are certainly necessary for a church to be rightly ordered and healthy; but they aren't necessary for a church to exist.

For a church to exist, you need members. You need — our definition again — a group of Christians who have covenanted together as Christ-followers and kingdom citizens by regularly gathering together for preaching the Bible and by affirming that covenant with one another through the ordinances.

I think it might help you to see how all this works by highlighting the work of the Lord's Supper. If you've sat through the Lord's Supper, you've probably heard the pastor read 1 Corinthians 11:26: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." The Lord's Supper, in other words, points to the gospel. You remember the Lord's death. Yet that's not all the Supper does. One chapter earlier, Paul says this about the Supper: "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor. 10:17). Paul affirms that we who are many are one body. Yet how do we know we are one body? The first and final phrases in the sentence offer the answer:

- "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body..."
- Or again: "we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread."

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It effectively says the same thing twice. Taking of the one bread, we demonstrate that we are one body. We know we are one body because we partake of the one bread.

In other words, taking the Lord's Supper shows, demonstrates, or shines a spotlight on the fact that we are one body. The Lord's Supper is a church-revealing ordinance. It's not a meal for Christian friends spending time together on a Friday night. It's not for parents and their children. It's for a church because it shows a church to be a church. That's why Paul tells the Corinthians to eat food at home if they're hungry, but to "wait for one another" when they take the Lord's Supper as a church (11:33).

Yet the Supper not only reveals a church as a church. It also constitutes a church as a church. Just think: what happens when the first time you and the other Christians on the deserted island take the Supper together? That act constitutes you as a church. It's at that moment you declare yourselves to be one body, borrowing again from Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:17. This is why formal church membership matters.

The Lord's Supper is a sign and a seal. It's a sign of the fact that we're one body. And, like signing a check or stamping a passport, it's the seal that officially registers a group of Christians as one church body. It's not a close-your-eyes meal. It's a look-around-the-room meal. When you take the Supper, the members of a church affirm one another as fellow Christians.

Stepping back, the larger lesson here is that a church is its members, and the members are the church. We reveal this by gathering around the preaching of the gospel and sealing it with the Supper. By taking the Supper together, we affirm one another as members of his church and citizens of Christ's kingdom.

In 2018, 62 other Christians and I planted Cheverly Baptist Church just outside of Washington, DC on the Maryland side. For the first three Sundays of February, we met, sang, prayed, and listened to Pastor John preach. But we weren't a church yet. We called these three Sundays dress rehearsals. Then on the fourth Sunday of that month we concluded the service by taking the Supper. That act, we said, constituted us an official,

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passport-stamped church in the ledgers of heaven. Only after that did we nominate and then vote on pastors or elders.

### ***Church as Embassy, Members as Ambassadors***

I've said several times now that the above definitions of church and church membership are like skeletal structure. My point is, if we had the time, we could go through each of the New Testament images for the church (family, body, temple, bride, etc.) and hang some flesh and muscle on those bones to really get a feel for what church membership is like.

To save time, however, I want to pick just one other theme in the New Testament for helping us better understand both the church and its members, and that's the theme of kingdom. Again and again, Jesus talks about his coming kingdom. Christ's kingdom is his rule, and churches are outposts or embassies of this rule. Every member, furthermore, is both a citizen and an ambassador of Christ's kingdom.

An embassy, if you're unfamiliar with the idea, is an officially sanctioned outpost of one nation inside the borders of another nation. It represents and speaks for that foreign nation. We have dozens of them in Washington, DC. I love walking down what's called Embassy Row where embassy after embassy from around the world is lined up. There's the Japanese Flag and embassy, there's Britain, there's Finland. Each embassy represents a different nation of the world, a different government, a different culture, a different people.

Or, if you are an American like me, and you travel to other countries, you'll find U.S. Embassies in the capitals of other nations. For instance, I spent half a year in Brussels, Belgium in college, during which time my United States passport expired. So I traveled to the U.S. Embassy in downtown Brussels. Stepping inside, they said, placed me on American soil. That building, the ambassador to Belgium, and all the state department officials working inside bear the authority of the U.S. government. They can speak for my government in a way that I, though a U.S. citizen, cannot, at least not in any official sense. Embassies and ambassadors present the official judgments of a foreign nation — what that nation wants, what it will do, what it believes.

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After looking at my expired passport and checking their computers, they rendered a judgment: I am in fact a U.S. citizen, and so they gave me a new passport.

Likewise, Jesus established local churches to declare some of heaven's judgments now, albeit provisionally. By giving the keys of the kingdom first to Peter and the apostles and then to gathered churches, Jesus gave churches a similar authority to the U.S. Embassy in Brussels: the authority to make provisional judgments concerning *what* is a right confession of the gospel (Matt. 16:13–19) and *who* is a citizen of the kingdom of heaven (18:15–20). This is what Jesus meant when he said churches possess the spiritual authority and the local believer must recognize: the authority to bind and loose on earth what's bound and loosed in heaven (16:18; 18:17–18). He didn't mean they could *make* people Christians or make the gospel what it is, no more than the embassy could *make* me an American or *make* American laws. Rather, Jesus meant that churches could *make* official pronouncements or judgments concerning the *what* and the *who* of the gospel on behalf of heaven. What is a right confession? Who is a true confessor?

A church makes these judgments through its preaching and the ordinances. When a pastor opens his Bible and preaches “Jesus is Lord” and “All have fallen short of God's glory” and “Faith comes through hearing,” he echoes heaven's judgments. And he binds the conscience of everyone who would call him or herself a citizen of the kingdom of heaven. Such preaching points to the *what* of the gospel — call it a heavenly confession.

Likewise, when a church baptizes and enjoys the Lord's Supper, it renders heaven's judgments over the *who* of the gospel — call them heavenly confessors. This is what we do when we baptize people into the name of Father, Son, and Spirit (see Matt. 28:19). We're giving such individuals a passport and saying, “They speak for Jesus.” We repeat the process through the Lord's Supper. Partaking of the one bread, we've seen in 1 Corinthians 10:17, both illumines and affirms who belongs to the one body of Christ. It's a church-revealing ordinance. This is a central part of the role of local church in the New Testament.

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The church's prayers of praise, confession, and thanksgiving, too, declare the judgments of God. We acknowledge who he is, who we are, and what he has given through Christ. Even our prayers of intercession, when aligned with his Word and Spirit, demonstrate that our ambitions have been conformed to God's judgments.

The church's singing is that activity wherein we repeat his judgments back to him and to one another in a melodic and emotionally engaged fashion.

Finally, we declare God's judgments in our lives throughout the week, both in times together and apart. Our fellowship and extensions of it should picture our agreement with the judgments of God, as we include righteousness and *exclude* unrighteousness. Every member should live as an anticipatory presentation of God's judgments. This is the responsibility of a church member.

That, ultimately, is what we call the worship of a church. A church's worship is its *agreement* with and *declaring* of the judgments of God. We worship when we pronounce in word or deed, whether eating or drinking, singing or praying, "You, oh Lord, are worthy and precious and valuable. The idols are not."

Meanwhile, every member is an ambassador. In Philippians, Paul calls us "citizens" of heaven (Phil. 3:20). In 2 Corinthians, he calls us "ambassadors" (2 Cor. 5:20). What does an ambassador do? As I said, he or she represents a foreign government. The work of the embassy is concentrated in that person. And every Christian is just such an ambassador of heaven.

Therefore, we leave every week's gathering, head into our towns and cities, and seek to represent King Jesus by making disciples. We declare his judgments as we evangelize with a message of reconciliation. We also seek to embody God's judgments as we live out the Christian life. U.S. presidents have often referred to the United States as a city on a hill. That's not what Jesus said. He said his people should be the cities on the hill (Matt. 5:14). That means, our lives as Christians together and apart as churches should represent heaven.

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When non-Christians spend time with the members of a church, they should taste the firstfruits of a heavenly culture. These heavenly citizens are poor in spirit and meek. They hunger and thirst for righteousness and are pure in heart. They are peacemakers who turn the other cheek, walk the extra mile, give their shirt and jacket if you ask for their jacket, won't even look at a woman lustfully much less commit adultery, and won't even hate much less commit murder. The non-Christian should experience all this in how we treat them, but they should also experience this as they watch us live together. This is the importance of church community.

Now, let's be honest. Our churches often don't live like cities on the hill or look like embassies of heaven. That's where we began this whole essay, remember? I'm reminded of how my pastor friend Bobby leads the Lord's Supper. He will remark that the Supper is "a foretaste of the heavenly banquet." That's a lovely idea. But when he uses those words, I look down at the little cracker in my palm that tastes like rubber and the snap-in-my-fingers plastic cup of watered-down grape juice which scarcely wets my whole mouth. And I think to myself, "Really? This is the foretaste? I hope the messianic banquet is a whole lot better than this!"

Such might be your response to my saying that the church is an embassy of heaven. Our fellow church members will disappoint us and say insensitive things. They'll sin against us, and we'll sin against them.

Not only that, but on some Sundays we will gather with our churches, and the songs won't capture our hearts. Our minds will drift during the sermon. The prayers won't feel relevant. And the conversations with friends after the service will get stuck in a rut of meaningless small talk. "So how was your Saturday?" "Fine, we didn't do much." "Okay." None of that feels very heavenly.

This is why biblical theologians remind us that we live in between the first and second comings of Christ. We live in the time of the "already/not yet." We have already been saved, but we have not yet been perfected. And this in-between time should set our hearts to longing for the perfection of the church and the pleasure of that coming messianic banquet. More crucially, our imperfections remind us to point people to Christ himself. He never sins or disappoints. We are the wafers and watered-down juice. He's

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the banquet. But the good news is that sinners like us can join that enterprise, if we'll only confess those sins and follow after him. This is a primary way of growing in Christ through the local church.

### ***Discussion & Reflection:***

1. Why is understanding God's kingdom helpful for understanding what the church is?
2. How does the category of "ambassador" contribute to your grasp of church membership? How might it influence the way you function in your own church?

# 3

## MEMBERSHIP IS A JOB

I've mentioned the fact that church membership makes us ambassadors of heaven. To put that another way, church membership is a job. The Bible doesn't call us to be spectators who show up for a weekly show and then drive home comparing show notes with our spouse: "The music this morning was lively. I loved it!" "Yeah, me too. And Preacher Jack was hilarious, don't you think?" No. Jesus has given every member of your church a job. And he's given the elders a special job as well: to train the members to do their job. Listen to Ephesians 4:

And he personally gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the training of the saints in the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ, until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God's Son, growing into a mature man with a stature measured by Christ's fullness (4:11–14).

Who does the "ministry" of building up the body of Christ? The saints. Who trains them for this job? The pastors and teachers. To what end? Unity, maturity, and Christ's fullness. This is the responsibility of a church member.

Concretely, then, what is the authority and work of every church member? Our work as members is to share and protect the gospel, and it's to affirm and oversee gospel professors — other church members.

Think about Paul's "amazement" in Galatians 1: "I am amazed that you are so quickly...turning to a different gospel" (1:6). He rebukes not the pastors, but the members, and tells them to reject even apostles or angels who teach a false gospel. They were supposed to have protected the gospel.

Or think of Paul's astonishment in 1 Corinthians 5. The Corinthians were accepting sin "not tolerated even among pagans" (5:1). "You are to remove the one who has done this thing," he says to the whole church (5:2). He

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even describes how this should happen — not on Thursday evening behind the closed doors of an elders meeting, but when the whole church gathered and could act together: “When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus, with my spirit present and with the power of the Lord Jesus, hand this man over to Satan so that his spirit may be saved” (5:4–5). The power of the Lord Jesus is actually there when they’re assembled in his name (Matt. 18:20). With that power, they were supposed to have protected the gospel by removing the man from membership. This is the biblical basis for church membership in action.

Every member of a church should recognize, “It’s my responsibility to protect the gospel, and it’s my responsibility to receive and dismiss members. Jesus has given it to me.” To use the business lingo again, we’re all owners. We all have a share in the losses and the profits.

Therefore, pastors who fire church members from this job, whether by formal church structure or by turning them into consumers, undermine the members’ sense of inclusion and ownership. They cultivate complacency, nominalism, and eventually theological liberalism. Kill church membership today and you can expect biblical compromises tomorrow.

Of course, the job here is bigger than showing up at members’ meetings and voting on new members. The church member’s job lasts all seven days. You cannot affirm and give oversight to a people you don’t know, not with integrity anyhow. That doesn’t mean you’re responsible to know personally every member of your church. We do this work collectively. But look for ways to start including more of your fellow members into the regular rhythm of your life. Ours is the work of representing Jesus and protecting his gospel in each other’s lives every day. This is how we find the benefits of church membership for the believer. Think of the checklist Paul offers in Romans 12. I’ll break up his text into a punch list for you to work down:

- Show family affection to one another with brotherly love.
- Outdo one another in showing honor.
- Do not lack diligence; be fervent in spirit; serve the Lord.
- Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; be persistent in prayer.

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- Share with the saints in their needs; pursue hospitality. (Rom. 12:10–13)

How are you doing on this list? This is part of overcoming loneliness through church belonging.

We must study and work to know the gospel better and better. We must study the gospel's implications and consider how they relate to repentance. Further, we must work to know and be known by our fellow members seven days a week. We try to start including more of our fellow members into our day-to-day lives. This is not a gas station rewards program where we fill out a form and drive away. It is through these relationships that you begin finding your spiritual gifts in a local church.

Now for the pastors or elders: If the job of church members is to guard the gospel by overseeing one another, what shall we say the pastor's job is? Again, Ephesians 4 says it's the job of the pastors to equip the saints for the ministry of building up the church (4:11–16). So they equip us to guard the gospel, which they do principally during the weekly gathering.

The weekly church gathering, then, is a time of job training. It's when those in the office of pastor equip those in the office of member to know the gospel, to live by the gospel, to protect the church's gospel witness, and to extend the gospel's reach into one another's lives and among outsiders. If Jesus tasks members with affirming and building up one another in the gospel, he tasks pastors with training them to do this. If the pastors don't do their jobs very well, neither will the members.

Christian, this means that you're responsible to avail yourself of the elders' instruction and counsel. Hold on to the pattern of sound teaching you've learned from them (2 Tim. 1:13). Follow their teaching, conduct, purpose, faith, love, and endurance, along with their persecutions and sufferings (2 Tim. 3:10–11). Be the wise son or daughter in Proverbs who takes the path of wisdom, prosperity, and life by fearing the Lord and heeding instruction. It is better than jewels and gold.

Listen to the author of Hebrews, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls" (13:17). Unless the elders or pastors are contradicting the Bible or the gospel, members should follow

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in matters pertaining to the life of the church. They should ordinarily submit. This is the heart of Biblical submission to church elders. The congregation maintains final authority in case the elders do contradict Scripture, but unless that happens, the congregation should follow.

When you put the pastor's job together with the member's job, what do you get? Jesus' discipleship program.

When someone wants to join the church where I pastor, I'll say something like the following in the membership interview:

Friend, by joining this church, you will become jointly responsible for whether or not this congregation continues to faithfully proclaim the gospel. That means you will become jointly responsible both for what this church teaches, as well as whether or not its members' lives remain faithful. And one day you will stand before God and give an account for how you fulfilled this responsibility. We need more hands for the harvest, so we hope you'll join us in that work.

The membership interview is a job interview, after all. I want to make sure they know this. I want to make sure they're up for the task. This illustrates why you need a local church home.

### ***What About Church Discipline?***

There's one other large topic we need to undertake when discussing membership, and that's church discipline. If membership is one side of the coin, church discipline is the other.

A fellow church member once asked me what made his relationship with me different from his relationship with Christians who do not belong to our church. After all, it would seem the Bible obligates us to love, pray for, give to, and sometimes teach Christians who don't belong to our church. Sometimes we gather at Christian conferences with them. So what's the difference?

The first difference is that we should gather weekly with our fellow members. That's why the author of Hebrews says, "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the

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more as you see the Day drawing near” (Heb. 10:24–25). We commit to gathering weekly in order to stir one another up to love and good works. This is part of the importance of church community.

Yet the second crucial difference, I said to my friend, is that we can participate in disciplining one another. I might warn Christian friends in other churches about sin. But I cannot participate in the formal process of removing them from membership in a church as an act of church discipline. The possibility of church discipline is what distinguishes our relationship with fellow members from our relationship with all Christians elsewhere. For that reason, it’s worth taking a moment to consider the importance of church discipline.

Broadly, church discipline is one part of the discipleship process. As in many areas of life, Christian discipleship involves both instruction and discipline, just like soccer practice or math class.

Narrowly, church discipline is correcting sin. It begins with private warnings. It ends, when necessary, with removing someone from church membership and participation in the Lord’s Table. The person will generally be free to attend public gatherings, but he or she is no longer a member. The church will no longer publicly affirm the person’s profession of faith.

A number of sins might call for loving warnings in private. But formal public discipline typically occurs only in cases of sin that meet three further criteria:

- It must be outward — it can be seen or heard (unlike, say, pride).
- It must be serious — serious enough to discredit the person’s verbal profession to be following Jesus.
- It must be unrepentant — the person has typically been confronted but refuses to let go of the sin.

Church discipline first shows up in Matthew 18, where Jesus says concerning the person in unrepentant sin, “If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” (18:17). That is, treat him as outside the covenant community. The person has proven uncorrectable.

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His life does not match his Christian profession. This is the church membership in the Bible pattern.

Another well-known passage on discipline, 1 Corinthians 5, helps us see the purpose of discipline. First, discipline exposes. Sin, like cancer, loves to hide. Discipline exposes the cancer so that it might be cut out (see 1 Cor. 5:2). Second, discipline warns. A church does not enact God's judgment through discipline. Rather, it stages a small play that pictures the great judgment to come (5:5). Third, discipline saves. Churches pursue it when they see a member taking the path toward death, and none of their arm-waving causes him or her to stop. It's the device of last resort (5:5). Fourth, discipline protects. Just as cancer spreads from cell to another, so sin quickly spreads from one person to another (5:6). Fifth, discipline preserves the church's witness. Strange to say, it serves non-Christians because it keeps churches distinct and attractive (see 5:1). This provides spiritual protection and accountability in church. After all, churches are to be salt and light. "But if salt has lost its taste..." Jesus said, "It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet" (Matt. 5:13).

The challenge of discipline is: sinners don't like to be held accountable for their sin. No matter where you are on the planet, people find an excuse not to practice discipline. In East Asia, they argue that the shame culture makes discipline impossible. In South Africa, they refer to the role of tribal identity, and maybe Ubuntu. In Brazil, they claim family structures will get in the way. In Hawaii, they talk about the laid back culture and the Aloha spirit. In America, they say you will get sued!

In short, sinners have found rationalization to avoid correcting sin ever since the Garden of Eden. But obedience and love call us to practice church discipline.

Church discipline at its core is about love. The Lord disciplines those he loves (Heb. 12:6). The same is true for us.

Today, many people have a sentimentalized view of love: love as being made to feel special. Or a romanticized view of love: love as being allowed to express yourself without correction. Or a consumeristic view: love as

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finding the perfect fit. In the popular mind, love has little to do with truth, holiness, and authority.

But that's not love in the Bible. Love in the Bible is holy. It makes demands. It yields obedience. It doesn't delight in evil but rejoices in the truth (1 Cor. 13:6). Jesus tells us that if we keep his commandments, we will abide in his love (John 15:10). And John says that if we keep God's Word, God's love will be perfected in us (1 John 2:5). How do church members help one another abide in Christ's love and show the world what God's love is like? Through helping one another obey and keep his Word. Through instruction and discipline.

### ***Discussion & Reflection:***

1. Can you summarize the reasons why membership can be thought of as a job? What are your responsibilities as a member of a church?
2. How does church discipline both *confront* contemporary notions of love and *conform* to the biblical concept of love?

# 4

## TWELVE REASONS MEMBERSHIP MATTERS

Our churches are not perfect. That much is certain. They can disappoint us. As I said at the beginning, my flesh sometimes resists the accountability and the call to love and to serve. But how precious the church is to Jesus. Do you remember what Jesus said to Saul when Saul was persecuting the church? “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (Acts 9:4). Notice that Jesus so closely identifies with his church that he charges Saul with persecuting him.

If Jesus, whom we claim as Savior and Lord, loves the church this much, might we reconsider how little we can love the church?

Not only this, notice how Jesus tells us to love our churches. He instructs, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34–35). Jesus could have said, “By your love for them, they will know you’re my disciples,” and that would have been true as well. But Jesus doesn’t say that. Instead, he says their “love for one another” will act as a witness and display his love. That’s an interesting remark. How does the love between members of a church display the fact that we’re his disciples?

Well, notice Jesus’ phrase “just as I have loved you.” How did Jesus love us? According to Paul, “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). Jesus loved us, forgivingly,

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forbearingly, graciously, in the face of our sin, not because we were beautiful, but because we needed mercy.

Now, think with me: what happens when a bunch of sinners live together? They offend one another. They sin against one another. They step on one another's toes. They let one another down. They fail to show up on time or do what they promised or remember your name or follow through on promises or disappoint you more dramatically. Our churches will disappoint us, as I've been saying over and over. But it's right there, right in the very location of our disappointments and frustrations and even hurts, that we have the opportunity to love one another like Jesus loved us — forgivingly, forbearingly, graciously. When we do that, we show the world what Jesus' love is like — forgiving, forbearing, gracious. We display the gospel.

Through this gospel, says the same Paul who persecuted Christians, the church displays the manifold wisdom of God to the rulers and authorities in heavenly places (see Eph. 3:10). It's a showcase for God's glory. Too easily we take our local churches for granted. This highlights the importance of church community as a spiritual necessity.

We can sum up everything said so far by considering twelve reasons church membership matters.<sup>2</sup>

1. **It's biblical.** Jesus established the local church and all the apostles did their ministry through it. The Christian life in the New Testament is church life. Christians today should expect and desire the same. This is the biblical basis for church membership.
2. **The church is its members.** To be “a church” in the New Testament is to be one of its members (read through Acts). And you want to be part of the church because that's who Jesus came to rescue and reconcile to himself. This answers what is a local church biblically.
3. **It's a prerequisite for the Lord's Supper.** The Lord's Supper is a meal for the gathered church, that is, for members (see 1 Cor. 11:20, 33). And you want to take the Lord's Supper. It's the team “jersey” that makes the church team visible to the nations. This is why formal church membership matters.

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4. **It's how to officially represent Jesus.** Membership is the church's affirmation that you are a citizen of Christ's kingdom and therefore a card-carrying Jesus Representative before the nations. And you want to be an official Jesus Representative. Closely related to this . . .
5. **It's how to declare one's highest allegiance.** Your membership on the team, which becomes visible when you wear the "jersey," is a public testimony that your highest allegiance belongs to Jesus. Trials and persecution may come, but your only words are, "I am with Jesus." This is the covenant of church membership explained in daily life.
6. **It's how to embody and experience biblical images.** It's within the accountability structures of the local church that Christians live out or embody what it means to be the "body of Christ," the "temple of the Spirit," the "family of God," and so on for all the biblical metaphors (see, for example, 1 Cor. 12). And you want to experience the interconnectivity of his body, the spiritual fullness of his temple, and the safety and intimacy and shared identity of his family. This is how we are growing in Christ through the local church.
7. **It's how to serve other Christians.** Membership helps you to know which Christians you are specifically responsible to love, serve, warn, and encourage. It enables you to fulfill your biblical responsibilities to Christ's body (for example, see Eph. 4:11–16; 25–32). This reveals the true responsibility of a church member.
8. **It's how to follow Christian leaders.** Membership helps you to know which Christian leaders you are called to obey and follow. Again, it allows you to fulfill your biblical responsibility to them (see Heb. 13:7; 17). This requires Biblical submission to church elders.
9. **It helps Christian leaders lead.** Membership lets Christian leaders know which Christians they will "give an account" for (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2).
10. **It enables church discipline.** It gives you the biblically prescribed place to participate in the work of church discipline responsibly, wisely, and lovingly (1 Cor. 5). Understanding the importance of church discipline is vital for the health of the body.
11. **It gives structure to the Christian life.** It places an individual Christian's claim to "obey" and "follow" Jesus into a real-life setting

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where authority is actually exercised over us (see John 14:15; 1 John 2:19; 4:20–21). This is why spiritual authority and the local believer must be connected.

12. **It builds a witness and invites the nations.** Membership puts the alternative rule of Christ on display for the watching universe (see Matt. 5:13; John 13:34–35; Eph. 3:10; 1 Pet. 2:9–12). The very boundaries around the membership of a church yields a society of people that invites the nations to something better. This is the role of local church in the New Testament.

By committing to a specific body, we are overcoming loneliness through church belonging and finding a place where we are truly known. When you look for benefits of church membership for the believer, look no further than these twelve pillars. They explain why you need a local church home and provide the spiritual protection and accountability in church that every believer needs.

### ***Discussion & Reflection:***

1. Of the twelve reasons listed above, which ones do you find most compelling?
2. What are some new concrete ways you can love the people in your church?



# APPENDIX: BAD REASONS FOR NOT JOINING A CHURCH AND GOOD REASONS TO JOIN ONE

Sometimes people offer excuses for not joining a church. Here is what they say and how I might respond.

- **“I’m a member elsewhere.”** Sometimes people say they don’t want to join because they are a member of a church elsewhere. If that’s the case, I try to explain that church membership is not a sentimental attachment. It’s a living, breathing relationship. If you’re in a place for more than a few months, you should join the church you attend.
- **“I had a bad experience with a church.”** Maybe a person had a bad, even abusive experience with a previous church. When that’s the case, patience and understanding should certainly be shown. Their challenge is like the challenge of someone coming out of an abusive marriage. It’s hard to trust again, and one cannot force trust. But you also know that recovering relational health means learning to trust again, which always involves taking a risk. Bottom line: you should still encourage the person to join, even if your manner and pace might adjust.
- **“I don’t trust the leadership.”** If a person refuses to join because they don’t trust the leadership, then they should be encouraged to find a

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church where they *can* trust the leadership and join it. After all, do you really think you'll grow in Christian maturity when you don't trust the ones leading you toward it?

- **"I don't agree with everything in the statement of faith."** See last answer (find a church where you do and join it).
- **"It's not in the Bible."** For the person who is not convinced a matter is biblical, I'll usually ask them to consider Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5. I'll also explain that, no, "club membership" is not in the Bible, but that church membership is more like citizenship, which is why Jesus gave the apostolic local church the keys of the kingdom.

What then are good reasons to join a church? Here is one way to concisely answer that questions:

- **For the sake of the pastors.** It lets the pastors know who you are, and makes them responsible for you (see Acts 20:28; Heb. 13:17).
- **For the sake of obedience to Jesus.** Jesus did not give you the keys of the kingdom for binding and loosing. He gave the keys to the apostolic local church (Matt. 16:13–20; 18:15–20). You don't have the authority to baptize yourself or feed yourself the Lord's Supper. It requires a church to affirm your profession of faith, which is what membership is at its very heart (see Acts 2:38).
- **For the sake of other believers.** Joining makes you responsible for one local congregation, and they for you. You now own or have a share in their discipleship to Christ. That is, you are now responsible for their growth and professions of faith, insofar as you are responsible for the church's faithful gospel preaching (Gal. 1) and that individual's discipline (Matt. 18:15–20; 1 Cor. 5).
- **For one's own spiritual good and safety.** Suppose you ever become that lamb who wanders away from the fold (Matt. 18:12–14). It's your church that Jesus will send after you (Matt. 18:15–20).
- **For the sake of non-Christian neighbors.** Membership helps to protect and promote the reputation of Christ on earth by guarding the church's witness (see Matt. 5:13–16; 28:18–20; John 13:34–35). Membership is how the world knows who represents Jesus!

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# ENDNOTES

1. This subsection was originally printed in *A Handbook of Theology*, edited by Daniel L. Akin, David S. Dockery, and Nathan A. Finn (B&H, 2023), 435–36.
2. This list of twelve is originally printed in my book *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus* (Crossway, 2012), 79–81.



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