

# COVENANT MEMBERSHIP

## UNDERSTANDING THE NEED FOR FORMAL COVENANT MEMBERSHIP

Covenant membership means we have *officially* identified with one another, have agreed to be accountable to one another, and have committed ourselves to serve and love one another under the shepherding oversight of our appointed leaders in the name of Christ.

### **Is formal membership biblical?**

[We are not asking if a particular *process* for official membership is biblical but if the *principle* of official membership is biblical.]

1. The nature of our relationship implies formal/official membership.
  - a. We are in a covenant relationship.
  - b. Covenants are *publicly recognized* mutual commitments.
  - c. There are no “common law” covenants.
  
2. Biblical terminology and imagery imply formal membership.
  - a. Body imagery (there is a defined body).
  - b. Family imagery (there is a shared name).
  - c. Sheep/flock imagery (there are fences).  
Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 3:2
  - d. Allotment language (there is a specified portion given).  
1 Peter 3:3
  - e. Citizenship language (there are identifying documents: passport, driver’s license, voter cards).
  - f. In and Out language (there must be defined parameters to have an in or out).  
1 Corinthians 5:2 and 12-13
  - g. Whole church (there is a knowable set).  
Acts 15:22; 1 Corinthians 14:23
  
3. Church relationships strongly imply formal membership.
  - a. Relationships between leaders and members.  
1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; 1 Timothy 3 and 5:17-22; Titus 1:5f; Hebrews 13:17
  - b. Relationships between the church and its members.  
Matthew 18:17 (listen to the church); 1 Corinthians 5:4-5; 2 Corinthians 2:6
  - c. Relationships among the members.  
Romans 12:10; 1 Corinthians 6:5; Galatians 6:10

4. Church practices strongly imply formal membership.
  - a. Baptism  
Acts 2:41 and 47
  - b. Communion  
“Covenant in blood”; 1 Corinthians 10:15-18; *Excommunication*.
  - c. Discipline  
Matthew 18:15-20 (two or three are gathered in the context of discipline); 2 Corinthians 2:6
  - d. Benevolence  
Acts 6:1f; 1 Timothy 5:9

### **What is meant by “official”?**

In our current culture, churches don't often use words like *official* with respect to church membership, but the concept flows out of the contours of Scripture (Matthew 16:18-19 – The Confession and the Keys, etc.) and are a rich part of church history. They are even part of current church practice, even if unspoken.

In this definition, the word *officially* is meant to communicate that the church is structurally organized under the authority of Scripture. It has appointed leaders who meet biblically specified qualifications (1 Timothy 3:1-7, etc.). It is composed of members who have Spirit-appointed gifts that are used in conjunction with one another in a Scripturally ordered manner (1 Cor. 14:40). It performs specific duties like the preaching of the Word and church discipline, and it celebrates the ordinances of baptism and communion under the oversight of appointed leaders. In other words, the church is not a haphazard community in which people do whatever is right in their own eyes but is structured under the governance of God's Word to us.

But what *formalizes* the relationships that define or delineate this kind of community and that make the exercise of its duties practically functional? If the nature of the church implies and the functions of the church require that it have clear definition and delineation, that is, that the church must be able to clearly identify itself in order to carry out its biblical duties, then some form of official church membership is biblically mandated.