

Fundamentals of Our Faith From the Beginning
Is Church Membership Biblical?

Warm up:

- I. What are some common objections to local church membership?
- II. What are some common misunderstandings about what formal church membership is/is for?
- III. Why might people tend to have an aversion toward church membership?

What is church membership?

“Church membership is *a formal relationship* between a local church and a Christian characterized by the church’s affirmation and oversight of a Christian’s discipleship and the Christian’s submission to living out his or her discipleship in the care of the church.” (Leeman)

The concept of formal church membership is grounded in the covenantal nature of our relationship to one another, in the authority given to the local church, and though it is not explicitly prescribed in any given text, it is assumed throughout the Scriptures.

Covenant membership in the local church is historical (it has been the practice of the church through the centuries), theological (grounded in scripture), and practical (it is the practical way that we live out the descriptions and prescriptions of the New Testament church).

1. The covenantal nature of our relationships is the foundation for formal church membership.

- a. The biblical terms/imagery used to describe the church indicate a covenantal relationship
 - i. Family: “Children of God”, “brother/sister” (too numerous to list)
 - ii. Union: Romans 12 (v5); 1 Corinthians 12; Philippians 2:2, etc.
 - iii. Belonging: Galatians 3:29; 1 Peter 2:9-10; Hebrews 8:10
 - iv. People, race, nation, body, temple, house, etc...
- b. Inasmuch as we are bound to Christ, we are bound to one another. As we belong to Him, we belong to one another. This invisible reality is certainly expected to take shape in ways that are recognizable.

Our covenantal relationship within the church *supports and leads to* formal church membership.

2. Formal membership is recognized and assumed throughout the scriptures

- a. There has always been an “inside” and an “outside” with respect to God’s covenant people
 - i. Eden had an inside and an outside (Gen 2:8, 3:24)
 - ii. God’s old covenant people were marked by circumcision (Gen 17:14)
 - Circumcised = in the covenant community. Uncircumcised = outside the covenant community
 - iii. There was an inside and outside of the camp while in the wilderness. (Lev 13:46, Num 3:5)
 - iv. The nation of Israel had an inside and outside as represented by food laws, festivals, ceremonial laws, specific places of worship, and strong prohibitions against inter-marriage (Lev 11, Lev 23, Josh 14-21, 1 Kings 8, Deut 7:3)
 - v. The New testament shows that there is an inside and outside of the church (1 Cor 5:12-13, Matt 18:17)
 - vi. In the new covenant, baptism and the Lord’s Supper are the boundary lines indicating who is in & out (Rom 6:3-4, 1 Cor 11:17-34, Gal 3:27).
 - Baptized/communicant = in the covenant community. Unbaptized/excommunicated = outside.

- b. Counting and caring for the called
 - i. Numerical records were kept of those who professed faith. The early church was tracking growth and caring for those who belonged. (Acts 2:41-47)
 - ii. The local church had an organized care plan for their widows (1 Tim 5:9-16)
 - iii. The local church identified qualified deacons to address their specific needs
 - iv. Specific members can be known by name (Romans 16:1-16).
- c. Connection, serving, one-anothering
 - i. A commitment to see to each other and gather (Hebrews 3:12-13, 10:23-25)
 - ii. An interconnected and interdependent body (1 Cor 12:12-27)
 - iii. A dedication to serve one another (Romans 12:4-21)

The biblical pattern is that God's people are identified formally and publicly with a particular people. There is an inside and an outside of those people. The people inside keep track of those who belong, know them and care for them. All of this *indicates* a formal commitment to covenant membership and could not be done apart from it.

3. Membership is required because of authority, submission, and accountability.

- a. Christians are required to obey (follow) their leaders and submit (yield) to them (Hebrews 13:17, 1 Tim 5:17)
 - i. Which Christian leaders do you submit to and how do you know?
- b. Leaders are commanded to shepherd and give an account for those allotted to them (Heb 13:17, 1 Pet 5:1-5)
 - i. Which Christians will a pastor give an account for? How will he know?
- c. Christians are commanded to faithfully carry our church discipline (Matthew 18:15-18, 1 Cor 5:1-2, 9-12)
 - i. Who do you tell? (Matt 18:17) How do you know who they are?
 - ii. What is the church supposed to do? (Matt 18:17)
 - iii. What is the person removed from? (1 Cor 5:2)
 - There must be some way to distinguish between the "outside" and inside".
- d. The church has been given the "Keys to the Kingdom" (Matthew 16:18-19, 18:17-18)
 - i. The "binding and loosing" is in reference to affirming the credibility of one's profession of faith
 - ii. The church is not a club – it is an embassy. Christians don't "join a church", they *submit* and *commit* to one.

Authority and submission are ideas only and not realities apart from covenant membership. Church discipline is impossible apart from membership. The church cannot exercise the keys apart from covenant membership. These factors make covenant membership a matter of biblical *obedience*.

Concluding Questions:

- I. Formally recognized church membership is not only beneficial for some and not only a matter of preference... It is a matter of biblical obedience for Christians. But should church membership look the same everywhere?
- II. What are some of the blessings and benefits of membership that may not have covered today?