

MEANINGFUL MEMBERSHIP – Part 3

“The practice of church membership among Christians occurs when Christians grasp hold of each other in responsibility and love. By identifying ourselves with a particular local church, we are telling the church’s pastors and other members not just that we commit to them, but that we commit to them in gathering, giving, prayer, and service. We are telling them to expect certain things from us and to hold us accountable if we don’t follow through. Joining a church is an act of saying, “I am now your responsibility, and you are my responsibility.” (Yes, this is countercultural. Even more, it’s counter to our sinful natures.)

Biblical membership means taking responsibility. It comes from our mutual obligations as spelled out in all of Scripture’s *one another* passages – love one another, serve one another, encourage one another. All of these commands should be encapsulated in the covenant of a healthy church.

Getting the last three marks correct will help with getting this mark correct. Church members will grow to recognize their mutual responsibilities the more they cherish the gospel, understand that conversation is God’s work, and evangelize by instructing “seekers” to count the cost. Less will Christians regard their churches with a come-as-you-please and get-what-you-can attachment – one more store to peek your head into at the Christian mall or market. More will they view them as a body in which all parts care for one another – the home in which they live.

Sadly, it is not uncommon to find a big gap between the number of people officially on the membership rolls and the number who regularly attend. Imagine a church of three thousand members with only six hundred regularly attending. I fear that many evangelical pastors today might be more proud of their so-called membership than distressed by the large number of members not attending. According to one recent study, the typical Southern Baptist church has 233 members with only 70 attending on Sunday morning.

What’s so dangerous about nonattending, responsibility-shirking members? Uninvolved members confuse both real members and non-Christians about what it means to be a Christian. And active members do the voluntarily inactive members no service when they allow them to remain members of the church, since membership is the church’s corporate endorsement of a person’s salvation. Did you catch that? By calling someone a member of your church, you are saying that that individual has your church’s endorsement as a Christian.

So if a congregation has not set its eyes upon an individual for months, even years, how can it testify that that person is faithfully running the race? If an individual is missing in action but has not joined some other Bible-believing church, how do we know if he or she was ever really a part of us (see 1 John 2:19)? We don’t necessarily know that such uninvolved people are not Christians; we simply can’t affirm that they are. We don’t have to tell the individual, “We know you’re going to hell; we only have to say, “We can no longer express our confidence that you’re going to heaven.” When a person is perpetually absent, a church endorsement is, at best, naïve; at worst, dishonest.

A church that practices biblical church membership does not require perfection of its members; it requires humility and honesty. It doesn’t call them to bare decisions but to real discipleship. It doesn’t discount the importance of an individual’s own experiences with God, but neither does it assume too much of those non-yet-perfected individuals. This is why the New Testament presents a role for a corporate affirmation by those in covenant with God and with each other.”

- Mark Dever, *What Is a Healthy Church?*, pp. 95-98

Twelve Reasons Why Membership Matters

(The following is adapted and expanded from Jonathan Leeman's book *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus* from Crossway, 2012).

- 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.
- 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.
- 3) **It's a pre-requisite 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" which makes the church team visible to the nations.
- 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.

From *Church Membership* by Jonathan Leeman: "A local church is a group of Christians who regularly gather in Christ's name to officially affirm and oversee one another's membership in Jesus Christ and his kingdom through gospel preaching and gospel ordinances"

Matthew 16:13-19 (ESV)

¹³ Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

¹⁴ And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

¹⁵ He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"

¹⁶ Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

Jesus a) established the church (which is its members), and b) gave it the authority to continue building itself by receiving or denying members based on two questions:

1. Is this a *right confession* about Christ?
2. Is this a *true confessor* of Christ?

By declaring (not determining or deciding) on earth who is a kingdom citizen, the church thus represents heaven and Christ.

The next time we see Jesus referencing the church is in Matthew 18. There we see the authority spoken of in chapter 16 now put into action:

Matthew 18:15-20 (ESV)

¹⁵ "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ 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 Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be

loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

Again, the expressions of _____ and _____ are present.

Like an ambassador or an embassy, we represent Christ!

So ... **who gets in?**

The simple answer: _____!

Can the local church affirm the individual's _____?

Can the person explain the _____ and their response to it?

Elements:

Faith Repentance Baptism

Closely related to this . . .

- 5) **It's how to declare one's** _____. 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 words are, “I am with Jesus.”

From baptism, to Lord's Supper, to weekly worship, we declare our allegiance to Christ and our relationship with the Church.

“What company is so obliged to worship God as those who have been not only created but redeemed? What group is so concerned with the task of proclamation of God's Word and evangelism as those who have themselves been saved through hearing the Word? What body will be so involved in making visible signs – in baptism and the Lord's Supper – of God's saving action in Christ? From the ministry of the Word to the management of the church's own affairs, what other group is so charged with responsibility as the church of Jesus Christ?”

- Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible*

- 6) **It's how to embody and experience** _____. 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 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.

The church is a body ...

In 1 Cor. 12:12–27, Paul refers to the believers at Corinth as “members” of the body of Christ ____ times.

Paul's understanding of the church as a body (the body of Christ) came from Jesus Himself:

Acts 9:1-5 (ESV)

¹ But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³ Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. ⁴ And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” ⁵ And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”

To describe a church as a “body” is to say that its members are _____ even as they exercise _____.

It also speaks to the inherent requirement that the members be functionally _____.

The church is a family ...

1 Timothy 3:14-15 (ESV)

¹⁴ I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, ¹⁵ if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.

1 Peter 4:17 (ESV)

¹⁷ For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?

To describe a church as a “family” is to speak of its _____ and _____.

The church is a temple ...

1 Corinthians 3:16-17 (ESV)

¹⁶ Do you not know that you* are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? ¹⁷ If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple. (plural*)

1 Peter 2:4-5 (ESV)

⁴ As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, ⁵ you* yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (plural*)

To describe a church as a “temple” is to say that God specially _____ and _____ these people.

Local church now → Universal church eternally

- 7) **It’s how to _____.** Membership helps you to know which Christians on planet Earth you are specifically responsible to love, serve, warn, and encourage. It enables you to fulfill your biblical responsibilities to Christ’s body.

Ephesians 4:11-16 (ESV)

¹¹ And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, ¹⁴ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. 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.

Ephesians 4:25-32 (ESV)

²⁵ Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. ²⁶ Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷ and give no opportunity to the devil. ²⁸ Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his

own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. ²⁹ Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹ Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³² Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

8) **It's how to** _____ . Membership helps you to know which Christian leaders on planet Earth you are called to obey and follow. Again, it allows you to fulfill your biblical responsibility to them (see Heb. 13:7; 17).

Hebrews 13:7 (ESV)

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

Hebrews 13:17 (ESV)

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.

Submission and the local church:

- Formal/official ...
- Local ...
- Social ...
- Financial ...
- Moral ...
- Spiritual ...

9) **It helps** _____ . Membership lets Christian leaders know which Christians on Planet Earth they will “give an account” for.

Acts 20:28 (ESV)

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.

1 Peter 5:1-5 (ESV)

¹ So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: ² shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; ³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. ⁵ Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

A local church formally _____ an person's profession of faith and baptism as credible.

A local church promises to _____ to a person's discipleship.

A church member formally _____ his/her discipleship to the _____ and _____ of the local church and its leaders.

NOTES: