



Foundations of a Healthy Church

Church Membership

Questions for Discussion

- What do people think of when they hear “church membership”?
- What confusion exists around the topic of church membership? What may cause people to be hesitant to join a church?
- Why is membership in a local church important?

Biblical Foundations

- The concept of church membership flows from the definition of a church.
 - “The Church is primarily a body of people who profess and give evidence that they have been saved by God’s grace alone, for his glory alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.”¹
 - A church is a body of believers in Jesus Christ called by God through the gospel that, by the ministry of the Spirit, gathers for worship, practices the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s supper, watches over one another in fellowship, and obeys the great commission.
- While the word “church” sometimes refers to the abstract, universal church, most frequently it refers to a local collection of followers of Jesus Christ.
 - Thus, the church should only be comprised of regenerate members, or those who have been born again. Each local church is an expression of the universal church, those who are in Christ.
 - **Acts 2:41** *So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.*
- The church is marked by a devotedness to Biblical teaching and prayers, but is also devoted to each other.
 - **Acts 2:42-47** ⁴²And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. ⁴⁴And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵And they were selling their possessions and belongings and

¹ Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 4th ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 123.

distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

- The “body” analogy for the church in Scripture implies commitment and interconnectedness.
 - **1 Corinthians 12:12-27** ¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

¹⁴ For the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? ¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.

²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” ²² On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, ²⁴ which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, ²⁵ that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

- Negatively, to underscore the importance of the church, Scripture warns of the danger of forsaking the body.
 - **Hebrews 10:24-25** ²⁴ And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, ²⁵ not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.
- Positively, to underscore the value of the church, Scripture speaks highly of Christ’s love for His people. If we are Christ’s followers, we too will love the church that he gave himself for.²
 - **Ephesians 5:25** Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her...

² Dever, 143.

- **Acts 20:28** *Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.*
- Church membership is the recognition of our common belonging in Christ and participating in this mutual commitment to a body of believers for one's own spiritual benefit, the spiritual benefit of that community of faith, and for the advance of the gospel.
- While all believers are members of the universal church, Scripture consistently refers to local, defined bodies with regard to life and practice.
 - Pastors, for example, are charged to shepherd the flock of God "among them", not all believers (see 1 Peter 5:1-4).
 - Members, for example, are encouraged to follow the pastors over them, not all pastors everywhere (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13, 1 Timothy 5:1, Hebrews 13:7).
- Church membership is also assumed in the cases of church discipline where "inside/outside" language delineates membership.
 - **Matthew 18:15-20**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."*
 - **1 Corinthians 5:11-12**¹¹ *But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. ¹² For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? ¹³ God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you."*
- **Implications:**
 - Only baptized believers in Jesus Christ can join a church.
 - Membership in a church requires an expression of mutual commitment.
 - Membership in a church implies a prioritization of spiritual investment.
 - Membership in a church implies a commitment to unity and love.
 - Membership in a church implies a defined group.

Why Join a Church?

The spiritual benefits of church membership are many. Below are several key reasons it is wise to commit to a local body of believers through church membership.

- **To Obey Scripture.** The Bible is filled with commands that can only be obeyed in the context of mutual commitment to other believers in a local church.
 - Romans 12:3-8 exhorts believers to use their gifts to edify other members of the body.
 - 1 Corinthians 12 similarly invites believers to edify one another with gifts and acts of service in direct connection to their status as “members” of one body.
 - There are over 50 “one-another” commands throughout the New Testament that imply faithful commitment to the church to obey.
- **For Your Own Protection/Assurance.** Scripture warns of the threat of self-deception and self-delusion that can lead us astray. The local church is God’s gift to us whereby we invite accountability and oversight such that we persist in our faith.
 - **Hebrews 3:12-14** ¹² See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. ¹³ But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called “Today,” so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness. ¹⁴ We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end.
- **For Your Physical and Spiritual Care.** It’s the body of Christ that provides a network of support for believers as they navigate this sin-cursed world. (Matthew 25:40; John 12:8; Acts 15:36; Romans 12:13; 1 John 3:17).
- **For Partnership in the Great Commission.** When believers work together, they are far more effective in evangelizing and missionary mobilization. It’s in our collective expression of our faith that we make the gospel visible to the watching world.
 - **1 Peter 2:9** *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*
- **For the Edification of Others.** Joining a church counters the errors of individualism in our society, and evidences the corporate nature of Christianity.³ It’s in the context of the local church that we work through problems and challenges together, that sin patterns are exposed and repented of, and that brothers and sisters are built up and encouraged in the faith. This includes the use of spiritual gifts, expressing love toward one another, serving one another, and every other others-focused discipline in the Christian life that emulates our savior.
- **For the Glory of God.** God has set his people apart for purity and for his purposes in the world. People see our good works in the context of the local church and give glory to our Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16; 1 Peter 2:12).

³ Dever, 133.

What Does Church Membership Entail?⁴

- Joining a local church entails the following elements. Note: Different churches may choose to implement certain patterns in different ways.
- **Baptism by Immersion after Profession of Faith.**
 - Scripture presents baptism as a new Christian's first step of obedience. The New Testament assumes that all Christians in a local church are baptized believers in Christ. For example, Romans 6 directly ties believers' baptism to belonging to the universal church, thereby connecting it to each local expression of the church.
 - Baptism is commanded by Jesus Christ in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20).
- **An Expression of Commitment.**
 - To underscore the themes of commitment and mutual accountability tied to membership in Scripture, many churches require a signed agreement to the church's statement of faith and a church covenant.
 - A statement of faith summarizes the doctrines that a local church believes. Churches require assent to such beliefs to ensure the unity and doctrinal fidelity of a local body.
 - A church covenant summarizes how a church intends to carry out life together. Historic Baptist confessions serve as summaries of the doctrines discussed above surrounding our mutual commitments to each other.
- **Partaking in the Lord's Supper.** The Lord's supper is an ongoing ordinance given by Christ wherein a local body reflects on Christ's gift of salvation and their status as a family in Him. While the ordinance is a memorial, it is not a bare memorial; the Holy Spirit works through the ordinance as a means of grace to the church.
- **Attendance.** One cannot be committed to the church if one doesn't attend.
 - Worship Services
 - Members' Meetings
 - Prayer Gatherings
- **Praying.** The body of Christ is supposed to pray for one another.
- **Giving.** The body of Christ gives to support the ministry and mission of the church.
- **Serving.** The body of Christ has been gifted with Spiritual gifts to use for the edification of the saints and the spread of the gospel. Every member has been given spiritual gifts; it's through the church that they discover, develop, and deploy those gifts.

⁴ Adapted from 9Marks of a Healthy Church, pg. 137-144.