

IS CHURCH MEMBERSHIP BIBLICAL?

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Who's in your family? The answer seems straightforward starting with our closest family: spouse, children, siblings, parents, and spiraling out to include grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. But where do we draw the line? Second cousins? Third cousins? Our pets? How far back do we go? Technically, we're all connected at some point through Adam and Eve, so is everyone in the world our "family"?

Who is in your church? Again, this seems straightforward: those with whom we worship on Sundays. But what about the visitors, or those who attend but aren't really connected, or those who don't come anymore? What about our broader family of churches or even the universal Church?

Church membership can be defined simply as the practice of joining a local gathering of believers and submitting to the leaders of that congregation. In a highly individualistic age which fears (or disdains) commitment, with a church on every corner (or even online), this practice is very useful and helpful. It's one that we've adopted globally as Sovereign Grace Churches: "All Christians are to join themselves as committed members to a specific local church."⁶⁴

But the crucial question is this: is church membership biblical? If you search the New Testament, you won't find an explicit text commanding "membership" anywhere. However, you will see that the practice of church membership is implied throughout.

Let's survey four ways in which membership is implied biblically.

Implications from the Metaphors for Church

Various images and metaphors are used by way of analogy to help us picture and understand what a "church" is.

- The Church is described as the body of Christ made up of many individuals and various parts: eyes, hands, feet, head that are all interdependent on one another for health and maturity (1 Cor. 12:12-27).

⁶⁴ Sovereign Grace *Statement of Faith*, "The Church of Christ."

- The Church in Ephesus is pictured as a collective unit as a flock of sheep bought by the blood of Christ (Acts 20:28) and as a “temple” being built together made up of various stones (Eph. 2:19-22).
- The Church is also called the “household of God” (1 Tim. 3:15) where the elders are the heads of house called to manage and steward the home (1 Tim. 3:5).

You put these images together and you have a clear sense that each local church, though fully included in the universal Church, is its own collective unit. Therefore, every Christian is called to be a part of the unit, not a foot kicking around on its own, a sheep wandering off, a lone-ranger brick making one-stack buildings, or a family consisting solely of one person. No, the church comprises individuals who are members of one another (Rom. 12:5).

Implications from the Teaching on Leadership

The writer of Hebrews says, “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith” (Heb. 13:7). This sounds like a nice idea, but then he goes on to command us to “Obey your leaders and submit to them” (Heb. 13:17). What at first seems like a pleasant and motivating call to imitation is ratcheted up considerably. We are called not just to be inspired by our leaders but also to obey them. We are even called to *submit* to them.

Which leaders are we called to look to in order to fulfill these verses? Does this include all the pastors in our city or town? No, this passage implies that Christians are meaningfully a part of a local gathering of believers with clearly established leaders that they are to look to. Remember, the church is the household of God, and her leaders are like the fathers of that family.

On the flipside, these leaders are responsible for those in their church, “...for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account” (Heb. 13:17). For whom are leaders meant to give to God an account? As Peter taught, they are called to shepherd the flock of God that is *among them*, exercising oversight (1 Pet. 5:2). Clearly there is a definable group of Christians, a flock of sheep, that the under-shepherds know, love, serve, protect, care for, and—of utmost importance for membership—for whom they will give an account to God.

Implications From the “One Another” Commands

There are at least thirty “one another” commands in the New Testament. For example, in the book of Romans, after Paul expounds upon our glorious salvation in Christ (Rom. 1-11) he moves on to command the church in Romans 12 to “love one another” (10), “outdo one another in showing honor” (10), “rejoice” with one another (15), “weep” with one another (15), and “live in harmony with one another” (16). To live a life worthy of our glorious calling is to live a life in loving, unified, and intimate community.

How else are we going to obey these commands unless we are meaningfully a part of a local church? We can't do this for every Christian worldwide. This requires investment and involvement in a local church community.

Implications from Church Discipline

Finally, it's clear in Matthew 18 that Jesus expects his followers to gather as a church and lovingly hold each other to a standard of holiness and unity. If a brother or sister in this new community is to continue in a pattern of sin that is known, verifiable, and unrepentant, Jesus says we are to confront them individually, and then with witnesses, and then "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" (Matt. 18:17). This implies a noticeable, identifiable, and necessary demarcation of who is in the church and who is out of the church.

This is also seen in 1 Corinthians 5 where Paul instructs the church, in the case of grievous sexual immorality, to "let him who has done this be removed from among you" (2). And note, they are to do this "when you are assembled" (4). That is, there is clearly a gathering of a local body of believers who are now restricting access to this gathering of one of their members. This is done not as punishment but as corrective discipline, "so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord" (5).

Removing someone from membership is a protective element of church membership. It protects the soul of the unrepentant person by creating the hopeful desire to be brought back into membership. And, removal is also protective for the flock, as "a little leaven leavens the whole lump" (verse 6). Membership maintains the integrity of the people of God, and thus helps protect the name of the one who saved us.

Final Word

Most of the newcomers to our church plant had never been an official member of a church. They had attended, been assimilated into, and then left their previous church in organic and unofficial ways. Those who have now joined us as members have routinely commented how they appreciate making the process more official. They know who their leaders are and what their leaders believe, which makes it easier to follow and submit in faith. They know who they are committing to love and serve and join in community. And they know who isn't included.

Although the language of church membership isn't used in Scripture, the idea is everywhere implied and required. It is how we fulfill the glorious calling to which we've been called. Through membership, we are a sheep in a flock, a stone in a temple, a part of a body, and a member of a church family. We have leaders to follow and care for us, with other Christians to serve and be served by. Membership, when lived out biblically, provides safeguards of biblical discipline to keep us on the straight and narrow path which leads to life.