

Ecclesiology
Topic 3 – Church Membership
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Church membership is an example of a well-established practice of the church that has received less attention than most areas of the doctrine of the church. This class will look at this subject with a particular look at how evangelical churches practice it and evaluate their approaches.

The definition of membership

Webster (online): *The state of belonging to or being a part of a group or organization.*

In regard to membership in a church, there are many ways church membership functions and in this class we will examine the fundamental issues in how people belong to a local church.

Local church membership vs. universal church membership

Church membership normally is in reference to a local church. However, because there are bible passages that speak to a universal church, we must first clarify this distinction between the local, or visible church and the universal, or invisible church.

All true Christians are church members in a real sense since the invisible church is truly made up of them. The Lord knows those who are His (2 Timothy 2:19) and there is a book of life containing the names of all true believers (Philippians 4:3; Revelation 21:27). The invisible church is made up of a clearly identifiable group known only to God. This group, or members, of the universal church includes all who truly believe in Christ from the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2) until the rapture of the church (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18).

The visible church does not equal the invisible church. There are true Christians that are not formal church members, and who are even not attending a local church. Also, there are church members who are not Christians, who are tares among the wheat (Matthew 13:24-30; 1 John 2:19). When we speak of church membership in practice, we are speaking of local church membership and this is with the understanding that many who claim to follow Christ are not known by Him (Matthew 7:22-23).

Church membership in the Bible

Membership is not a word that appears in the Bible. Mark Dever, begins his section on “Church Membership” as one of the “Nine Marks of a Healthy Church” by recognizing this fact:

In one sense what we know today as "church membership" is not biblical. We have no record of first-century Christians who lived, say, in central Jerusalem deciding to become involved in one particular assembly of Christians rather than another. From what we can tell, there was no church shopping because there was only one church in a community. In that sense, we know of no list of church members in the New Testament.

It is hard to miss the conundrum of how something that is not biblical can nevertheless be one of the nine marks of a healthy church!

Many people will look to certain biblical parallels to modern day church membership in order to demonstrate that there are aspects of what we understand to be membership that are found in the Bible.

1. Recognition of general church growth (Acts)

The seven "progress reports" in Acts (cf. 2:47; 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:30-31), with Acts 2:41 giving a general estimate of 3,000 people baptized at the coming of the Holy Spirit.

2. The existence of church government (Titus 1)

This requires a formal establishment of selected leaders who are identified. There is a biblical mandate for this degree of formality. This presupposes there are people to be led and very likely even an awareness of who those people might be.

3. The existence of the list of widows to be cared for (1 Timothy 5:9)

The instructions regarding the care for widows provide some indication of how the church increased in its organization as time went on.

4. The ability to exclude people from a congregation (1 Corinthians 5:13)

There must be a sense of someone being included in order to have an exhortation to exclude them.

5. The responsibility to obey and be subject to church leaders (Hebrews 13:17)

Obviously, there is an expectation that a believer has "leaders" to obey. There is a responsibility that each Christian has to assemble with fellow believers (Hebrews 10:24-25), and as such there is the responsibility to participate in an obedient fashion.

While there is a good deal of biblical instruction regarding the nature of how a Christian ought to conduct themselves in the context of the local church, there is an absence of detail of what this form should look like.

Aspects of modern church membership

1. Membership lists

Churches that have a larger attendance will become more formal in their church membership because of their interest in connecting with those who are considered to be church members. Churches that are small have a much greater awareness of their members. At some point of church growth, creating a list of church members is a natural means of overseeing a fellowship.

In the modern era of large churches, much of the popular material regarding church membership is from the standpoint of someone trying to manage a greater degree of complexity and of someone with a greater interest in the topic. Managing a database of church members has become such a foregone conclusion to church leaders today that it is hard to consider a time and a place where everyone in the church knew each other and a list wasn't necessary.

2. Membership requirements

Churches have various requirements to become formally accepted to join a church:

a. Belief in Christ

The most common requirement of church membership is for a person to be a Christian. A profession of faith is deemed essential and this corresponds with the belief that the universal church is manifested visibly in the local church.

In places today like America where professions of faith in Christ bring no real persecution, this requirement is fairly easily met. The end result of this requirement is a church that believes that all their members are believers when in reality this is not the case. Many churches however, recognize that a simple profession of faith will bring unbelievers into their membership as they look to other ways to eliminate this possibility.

b. Baptism

Another very common requirement for church membership today is baptism. The Book of Acts often includes baptisms as connected to the growth of the church. Many have aptly concluded that the early church knew nothing of an unbaptized person in the church.

Unlike today, the early church had a common understanding of the meaning of baptism and they had a united church leadership under the authority of the apostles. Today

churches must decide what baptisms are acceptable and what evidence is necessary. This leads to people who believe that they have been baptized and become involved with a church that would not view their baptism as being legitimate. Many churches recognize that often people think they have been baptized but have not and look for ways to communicate what they understand biblical baptism to be.

c. Classes

In order to communicate these requirements such as belief in Christ and baptism, local churches will set up a membership class to be completed prior to joining the church. This class serves not only to teach about what the church believes is necessary for membership, but also allows them an opportunity to examine those attending and see if they have a genuine commitment.

d. Covenants

Churches often require a commitment that is beyond verbal assent. These are known as membership covenants, or agreements in some respect to abide by the teaching of the church and are typically signed forms.

3. Membership benefits

Church membership often brings certain privileges:

a. Voting

Many churches are congregationally ruled which brings voting on certain decisions. In order to have the opportunity to vote, a person must be a church member.

b. The Lord's Supper

Some churches limit the Lord's Supper to only church members, a practice known as "closed communion."

c. Serving

Many churches require people who serve in any formal capacity in the church to become members of the church. In practice, however, this demand is commonly adjusted according to the pragmatic needs of the church.

d. Accountability

Church membership is commonly seen as requiring certain practices, such as regular attendance, financial support and perhaps a certain moral standard. This is understood by churches as providing certain accountability through encouragement and even rebuke in some cases.

An examination of modern church membership

1. Joining a church

There is a necessary tension between the desire to add more church members and the desire to have those church members committed to the church. In other words, the more we expect people to come to church membership with a full commitment, the less people will end up as members. Conversely, the less we expect people to come to church membership with a full commitment, the more people will end up as members.

Jesus wants weary people to come to Him (Matthew 11:28) and we are called to serve them (Matthew 10:35-38). The church in Acts brought people into the church quickly with baptism being the only apparent prerequisite. This should make us question the role of additional requirements for church membership.

Furthermore, there is an erroneous expectation that considers people as continuing with their commitment. The Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13) explains how people will hear the word and immediately responding with joy but when affliction, persecution, the deceitfulness of riches and the worries of the world come, they fail to continue. Given this parable of Jesus, along with our abundant experiential evidence of church memberships filled with names of people who are no longer actively involved, it is flawed to view that a more demanding membership screening process will result in a stronger church.

While a more exclusive membership threshold does not necessarily result in a stronger church, it normally results in a church having true Christians who are attending but are not members. Particularly in a culture that allows for people to freely begin attending and relating to a church unhindered there will be non-members that will have a much greater affect on a church than many members will have.

When churches follow the biblical leadership pattern of being led by elders, the value of membership in the voting process is eliminated. Under elder rule of a local church, there no longer is a concern that people who are incapable of making decisions for the church would join in the leadership process.

Given the complete lack of biblical support for the practice of closed communion, the basic other reason why people support additional requirements for membership is because they believe it will serve the members. Whether restricting people who may be Christians from membership because they do not take a class or sign a document is debatable. However, underlying this approach to membership is a belief in the value of certain external classes or commitments as inherently important for spiritual growth.

There is no question that a class may be very helpful, but to expect that it is necessarily helpful to all is a stretch. If it is not necessarily helpful then should it be mandatory? If it is mandatory then have we failed to accept believers into our church who may not meet our standards (cf. Romans 15:7)?

Likewise, commitments that come from the heart of the believer will be much more meaningful than commitments that are solicited by a church leadership and merely agreed with by members. Do these signed agreements actually produce an increase in true commitment? Are there any negative consequences that occur when these agreements are broken? What metrics are employed to evaluate whether a member has fallen short of their commitment? What details are included in the covenant?

Typically, these covenants that churches seek are light on details. When people have the freedom to abandon their commitment at will without consequences, you have to wonder what the value of it really is in the first place. When agreements are crafted so that people have to suffer consequences, you have to wonder whether the church has placed the traditions of men to unnecessarily burden those seeking to follow Christ.

2. Leaving a church

What happens if a member who has finished a class and signed a membership covenant decides to leave that church? What if that member has reasons that are unsatisfactory, according to the church leadership?

Some who advocate a more robust membership standard believe that since the membership covenant cannot be entered into apart from an act of the congregation, it therefore cannot be dissolved apart from an act of the congregation. To quote Mark Dever, "Somehow the congregation needs to be taught that it must act to admit someone into membership, and that apart from death it must act to release someone from church membership."

The area of church discipline is a common situation where a person may choose to leave a church. If a person is looking to walk in willful and unrepentant sin, unwilling to listen to their fellow believers call for repentance (Matthew 18:15-17), they often will stop all their involvement with the church. Should they be pursued or allowed to leave?

The biblical obligation that we have as believers with our brothers who are walking in overt sin is to (1) serve the brother by admonishing him (Matthew 18:15-20, 1 Thessalonians 5:14) and (2) to protect the church (1 Corinthians 5). There are many details of how this should be done that are not specified. Can people thwart the church discipline process by leaving the church?

Those who advocate that we are required to pursue people who do not want to listen to us regardless of their participation in the church believe that church discipline is God's unique means of bringing about repentance. To not carry it through regardless of the circumstances is thought to be limiting the work of God by not following the biblical mandate.

However, people have the legal and ethical freedom to leave a church, even for bad reasons, without being harassed by the church. There were disciples of Jesus who freely departed (John 6:66) and later there were church members who freely departed (1 John

2:19). To not respect the right of people to make their choices is to exercise ecclesiastical authority that we do not have. Any church leadership is only responsible for the souls of people who wish to be cared for.

To not allow people the freedom to leave a church membership presupposes that the church leadership is right. What would these same church leaders think if they were involved in a church that wrongly felt that their actions were sinful and would not let them leave the church without church disciplining them?

While people can and do walk away from the Lord and into a life of sin, what a church cannot righteously allow is for a rebellious person to continue to associate with the church (1 Corinthians 5:11). The wicked man must be removed (1 Corinthians 5:14) regardless of their official status of church member or not.

Reasons for Valley Bible's approach to church membership

Valley Bible Church has church membership. To be a member of our church, all you must do is attend. There are many reasons why we believe this is the best approach in light of the teaching of God's word and the culture that we minister in.

1. By accepting all attenders as members there is no artificial dichotomy between those participating in the life of the church as members and those participating in the life of the church as attenders. Our church remains protected through being elder led.
2. By accepting all attenders as members there is no false recognition that some people are saved because the church declares them so based upon acceptance into membership. The Lord knows those who are His (2 Timothy 2:19).
3. By accepting all attenders as members we are able to welcome people to our church without moving them to some level of commitment that they may be unable to make. This helps people grow in their faith at their pace.
4. By accepting all attenders as members we have the legal right along with the biblical responsibility to potentially church discipline all rebellious, unrepentant people in our church.
5. By accepting all attenders as members we have no group of people who are members of our church in name only but whom we never see.

Conclusion

By focusing our teaching strictly on the Bible, we will become less attractive to people who are not genuinely interested in the Lord Jesus Christ and the concern that our church will be overrun by non-Christians simply will not be realized. Those who attend will be welcomed with an reasonable expectation for them to remain attending if they have a sincere desire to follow Christ.