



## “Membership in the Church”

**Idea:** Church membership is the natural outcome of the gospel, saving us from the domain of darkness and into the Kingdom of the Son.

**Intro:** “If you call yourself a Christian but you are not a member of the church you regularly attend, you might be going to hell.” Do I have your attention? Some of you thought about daydreaming through today’s sermon. Your mind was already drifting off to the things you need to do this afternoon because a message about membership does not sound very exciting. If membership is just the idea of having your name formally on a roll sheet, then I might agree with you. If membership means that you no longer can park in guest parking, that you now need to find a place to serve, and that you financially support the church, then dozing off might be understandable. Membership in the church, however, is so much more. For this reason, Mark Dever has used that shocking statement often when teaching on the biblical concept of church membership. He wants those who call themselves Christ-followers to urgently see the need for a healthy local church in a Christian’s life and to begin sharing the passion for the church that characterizes both Jesus and His followers. He wants Christians today to see the beauty and necessity of church membership because the Bible would have us see it. This is our objective too.

**Inquiry:** Last Sunday, we established that the common word for church in the Greek New Testament is ἐκκλησία (ekklēsia). It literally means “the called-out ones.” According to John Hammett, the term is found 114 times in the New Testament. Three of these uses refer to a secular assembly and two refer to the Old Testament people of God. This leaves 109 other references in the New Testament, and all of them describe the church. The writers use ἐκκλησία to refer to the church in both a local and a universal sense. The overwhelming majority, however, speak of local churches that gather and act.

The church universal is the collection of Christ-followers past, present, and future who comprise the Kingdom of God. We find a glorious picture of the church universal in Revelation 7. The Apostle John described what he saw in his revelation of the eschaton.

*<sup>9</sup>After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, <sup>10</sup>and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”*

This is the universal church of Christ, and we find it depicted in the Bible. Nevertheless, the most common portrayal of the church is the local assembly of believers in a specific location. Of the twenty-one New Testament epistles, thirteen of them were addressed to local churches. The others were written to individual believers or groups of believers, but all of them were known to be members of local churches. Timothy pastored the church in Ephesus. Titus pastored the church in Crete. Philemon was a member of the church in Colossae. Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians, and the writer commanded them to not forsake gathering

with the local church (Heb 10:25). James was the pastor of the Jerusalem church. Peter wrote to church members who had fled their hometowns because of persecution. Likewise, John wrote to individual believers who were members of local churches. Jude addressed believers in an unknown local church that seemed to be largely comprised of Jewish believers. This focus on the local church in the New Testament reminds us that the Kingdom of God is not a futuristic theory but a present-day reality. Last Sunday, as we discussed mission in the church, we discovered that the church is an embassy of Christ's Kingdom, serving as a sovereign outpost in a foreign land. It is locally made up of individual believers who are Christ's ambassadors, serving as sovereign representatives of one nation to another nation.

Therefore, for those of us who want to know what God's Word says and obey it, the Bible's focus on the church and the people who comprise it forces us to consider two things. First, we need to ask the question, "What is church membership?" Biblically speaking, church membership is the natural outcome of the gospel, saving us from the domain of darkness and into the Kingdom of the Son. Unfortunately, many Christians view church membership as the joining of a social club because the English word *membership* is a club word. You will not find the term *church membership* in the New Testament precisely because it does not view it as a club practice. Clubs and organizations begin with a point of common interest or a service to be provided. Membership and involvement are voluntary. Churches have all this, but they have something more, which is a King who requires the obedience of His people. King Jesus expects His subjects to participate together as citizens of His Kingdom expressed through local embassies. This concept is not foreign to us as Americans. In every nation where the U.S. State Department has an embassy, the ambassador to that particular nation represents the U.S. government. Likewise, the U.S. citizens living in that nation also relate to the embassy as the local expression of the greater nation.

The Bible knows nothing of lone-rangerism. Instead, all throughout the cannon of Scripture we find God's people in covenant community with another. In the Old Testament it is Israel and the Jewish faith. In the New Testament it is the local church. In both, God's people are portrayed collectively as citizens of His Kingdom. Today, we live in the age of the church.

Second, we need to ask, "What is a church member?" Jonathan Leeman offers a helpful answer to this important question. He says:

"A church member is a person who has been officially and publicly recognized as a Christian before the nations, as well as someone who shares in the same authority of officially affirming and overseeing other Christians in his or her church."

Leeman's definition presupposes regenerate church membership. In other words, a church member is a person who has turned from his or her sin and to Christ in faith and repentance for the forgiveness of sin and new life.

It is the local church who affirms one's confession of faith as credible. The local church possesses the keys of the Kingdom, not from the sense of conveying salvation upon someone but from the sense of formally recognizing salvation in the person. Jesus described this responsibility to Peter.

[Read Matthew 16:16-19.](#)

This is the first of two times that Jesus used the word *church*. Peter had given his great confession of faith in response to Jesus' question of who he and the other disciples believed Him to be. Jesus then indicated that upon this "*rock*" (confession) He would build His church. The church is not built on words or on people; it is built on people who believe the right gospel words. Peter, the apostles, and subsequently the local church has been given "*the keys of the kingdom of heaven.*" The local church has heaven's authority for declaring who on earth is a kingdom citizen and therefore represents heaven. Effectively, this is the authority to receive and dismiss members because their profession and testimony bear witness of their citizenship or lack of citizenship in heaven.

The second time Jesus uses the word *church* is found two chapters later. In Matthew 18:15-20, Jesus describes a brother whose sinful lifestyle is out of step with his confession. Four rounds of confrontation are prescribed by the Lord to win this brother back. If he repents, then his confession of faith regains its credibility and the confrontation ceases. His life matches his confession, and he is representing Jesus rightly. If, however, he persists in his sin, then the local church ultimately has heaven's authority to declare on earth that the man's life does not represent Christ and His Kingdom. His life does not match his confession, and he is not representing Jesus rightly. Therefore, his membership is stripped, and he is treated as an unbeliever. The overarching point here is to highlight the role of the local church in the recognition of a confessor's faith. Just as a U.S. embassy has the authority to recognize one's citizenship in a foreign land, the local church has heaven's authority and responsibility to recognize one's profession of faith on earth.

Church membership, therefore, is a declaration of citizenship in Christ's Kingdom. Membership is a passport of sorts. It is an announcement in the press room of the Kingdom. It is the declaration that you are an official, licensed, card-carrying, bona fide representative of Jesus. Upon this foundation of membership in the church, there are four biblical perspectives of membership that I want you to see. Some might wonder, "If membership is the natural outcome of the gospel, then why is it not explicitly mentioned or displayed in the New Testament?" It is, so let me show you.

## 1. Membership Records

Reading through the Bible, you will not see the command, "You shall join a local church." What you will see, however, is a clear record of members who were part of the local church. Acts 2 chronicles the launching of the church in Jerusalem. As Peter preached the gospel after the coming of the Holy Spirit, the people responded by accepting his message and being baptized. That day "*about three thousand souls*" were added to the original 120 disciples who comprised the church at the time (Acts 2:41). How did Luke know 3,000 were added to the church at Pentecost? He knew because someone was counting and keeping a record of who was in the Jerusalem church. In addition, these 3,000 Christians did not just get baptized and never show up again. They acted like church members by regularly gathering to hear the apostles' teaching, to pray, to meet the needs of others, to fellowship, and to observe the Lord's Supper (Acts 2:42-46). Their display of the gospel through the local church resulted in new believers being "*added to their number day by day*" (Acts 2:47).

The records continue. As the church membership continued to grow, we are informed in Acts 4:4 that the roll had grown to include 5,000 men. In Acts 6, we learn of a list of Hellenistic widows in the church who needed ministry. In addition, we see that other local churches kept membership records. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul commands the church in Corinth to remove a particular man who was living in open, unrepentant sexual sin. He says, "*Let him who has done this be removed from among you*" (1 Cor 5:2). Paul's instruction to remove this man from them presupposes that he was a member of their local church. You cannot remove a person who is not a member.

Membership is seen in the records kept by the New Testament local churches.

## 2. Membership Assumptions

Membership is assumed in the "one another" commands. There are upwards of forty-six such commands. Here are just a few:

- Love one another (John 13:34; Rom 12:10; 1 John 3:11).
- Comfort one another (2 Cor 13:11)
- Agree with one another (2 Cor 13:11)
- Bear one another's burdens (Gal 6:2)
- Encourage one another (1 Thess 4:18)

- Pray for one another (James 5:16)
- Serve one another (1 Pet 4:10)
- Be kind to one another (Eph 4:32)

As we study and seek to obey these Christian directives, we discover that it is impossible to do so without committing yourself to a local church. There is no concept in the Bible of God's people living outside of the community of faith. Israel knew who the members of their tribes were, and it was equally true of the local churches in the New Testament. These simple action commands are directed at Christians, living out the gospel within the local church. Membership is seen in the assumptions of the "one another" commands.

### 3. Membership Images

The authors of the New Testament often used strong metaphors to describe the church and its membership. We read that the church is like a body, a flock of sheep, branches of a vine, a bride, a temple, God's building, a people, exiles, a holy nation, a royal priesthood, salt of the earth, the Israel of God, and the elect lady among other word pictures. These images bring the reader into the greater picture of the church. It is like flipping through a friend's vacation photo album. One picture presents a beautiful perspective of one element of the vacation, but by looking through each photo in the album, you begin to see the fuller expression of what was experienced abroad. All of these images present the idea of a single member within a greater membership.

*<sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>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. <sup>14</sup>For the body does not consist of one member but of many. – 1 Cor 12:12-14*

Do you see the strong sense of community in this metaphor? No finger or spline exists and thrives by itself. They both require the rest of the members of the body, so it is with individual Christians. The greater body is needed to thrive as a Christian. Membership is seen in the images presented.

### 4. Membership Protections

Some of the strongest calls for church membership are established in the protections found in the New Testament's teaching on church discipline. At the foundational level, church discipline begins with the clear and systematic teaching of God's Word. It moves on through the discipleship channels of accountability and rebuking of sin. Finally, we find its full expression in the act of excluding someone from membership in the church and participation in the Lord's Supper who professes to be a Christian for serious, unrepentant sin, which he or she refuses to lay down. This is the process laid out in Matthew 18:15-18. We also see this watchful protection in passages like Galatians 6:1-2; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15; 1 Timothy 1:20; 5:19-20; and Titus 3:9-11.

This protection over one's discipleship is a responsibility given to the church for those inside the church. It is not extended to unbelievers outside the church (1 Cor 5:12). Therefore, church discipline necessitates church membership. I hope you can see membership in this gracious protection.

**Conclusion:** The nature of sin, left to itself, will never lead us toward a community of faithful gospel believers. Instead, it will always lead us in the opposite direction. It will direct us toward isolation and a lone-ranger approach to the Christian life. The problem with lone-rangerism is that it is nowhere found in Scripture. On the other hand, the continual refrain of God's Word is a call toward relational intimacy within the body of believers known as the local church.

Do you remember the opening statement? “If you call yourself a Christian but you are not a member of the church you regularly attend, you might be going to hell.” I did not use this statement because I want to offend you. I used it to direct your attention to the Bible’s call to submissive citizenship in the Kingdom and its expression in the local church. There are blessings you never imagined within the local church. In Christ, you have been brought near and made into a people for His own possession.

*<sup>9</sup>But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. <sup>10</sup>Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. – 1 Pet 2:9-10*

As we contemplate the role, functions, and structures of the local church, we see that membership is not optional. Through this formal and relational commitment, we are defined as members of the Kingdom of the Son. Likewise, we give and are given permission to speak hard words to one another for our collective sanctification.

Are you leaning into church membership? Are you a member with just a name on the membership roll of RL? Are you more than a name on a roll sheet? Are you attending regularly, participating in ministry, discipling one another, sharing the gospel here and there, and contributing to the needs of the church? It all begins with a simple “Yes” to the gospel.