

Theology of Church - Membership

Does God intend for every Christian to officially identify with a local church through formal church membership?

Church membership connects Christians with the historical pattern we see described in Scripture.

Now this is important since Scripture nowhere commands Christians to take a class, or sign a covenant of membership. However, while Scripture never explicitly commands church membership, it clearly assumes local church membership throughout the New Testament.

The book of Acts presents a strong, history of Christian's belonging in local churches. The possibility of being saved and living apart from any belonging with a local assembly of Christians is entirely foreign to the New Testament Scriptures.

For example, Acts consistently records how new believers were "added" to the church. While we might debate whether there were formal membership rolls in place, here's the New Testament pattern: people would repent and believe in Christ for their salvation, receive public baptism, and then devote themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. New Testament Christians always join up with a local assembly of believers. There's no such thing as an autonomous Christian in the New Testament.

The local church is God's design for Christians' relational care for one another. We see this first illustrated in, Acts chapter 6, where the church in Jerusalem cared for believing widows scattered all throughout the region. This care was organized through, and received by, one's participation in the local church. When complaints came to the apostles about how the widow's aid was being distributed, they charged the local church in Jerusalem to select seven men from "among you," or from within the church, to make sure that all the Christian widows were properly cared for. Acts 6 is clear, the mutual care of Christians was organized and administered through a local church.

1 Timothy 5:9 gives further clear evidence that Christian widows publicly identified with their local church by enrolling on a list that each church maintained for the purpose of financial aid. Care for individual Christians was administered through one's public identification with your local church. And this wasn't just the widows. Whenever the Scriptures speak of Christians caring for other Christians, these efforts were done by and through local churches.³

Further, Scripture clearly reveals a History of leadership in local churches. The New Testament assumes that every Christian will be under the leadership of a particular local church. For example, all of the New Testament epistles were written to local churches, or leaders of local churches. It was assumed that every Christian would receive His Word because he or she was committed to a local church, and benefiting from the spiritual leadership of a local church.

Verses like Acts 15:22 make it clear that the leaders knew who specifically was identified with the local church. [22 Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, men who were leaders among the believers.]

2 Corinthians 3:1 implies that church leaders provided letters of recommendation for members transferring from one church to another.

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Practical Implementation of membership

Christians are called to live in community with mutual accountability and love (Heb. 3:13; Eph. 4:11-16; etc). Furthermore, elders (pastors) are called to lead, feed and protect the flock spiritually (1 Pet. 5:1-3).

Leaders are going to give an account for their people (Heb. 13:17 ¹Obey ^xyour leaders and submit to them, ^yfor they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to ^zgive an account.). In order to do that, leaders need to know precisely who they are going to give an account for. Church membership helps to clarify who has willingly put themselves into community and under the pastoral care of the church. This clarifies community and accountability.

Church Membership is Theological.

When someone becomes a Christian they are baptized by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). This is the universal church, the body of believers from throughout history. However, our first priority then is to go and unite with the family, the church. What we need to do is identify with the local manifestation of this spiritual body. We need a local church that is a part of the universal church.

Once we do this we come and join the church so that we can live the Christian life together. At conversion we are spiritually united to Christ, receiving all of the blessings of new birth. Then we, out of this union to Christ, join together with other believers to live in community. In other words, church membership is the physical expression of the spiritual reality of new life in Christ. We are partakers of a new identity and a new family that is characterized by holiness.