

Is Church Membership in the Bible?

This article is a summary of the message preached at Grace Life Church on February 4, 2018 by Pastor Mark. It was not recorded in audio format.

Introduction

What is church membership? Jonathan Leeman defines church membership like this:

"Church membership is a formal relationship between a local church and a Christian characterized by the church's affirmation and oversight of a Christian's discipleship and the Christian's submission to living out his or her discipleship in the care of the church."¹

In this definition, we see three key components to church membership:

- 1) how a local church relates to a Christian
- 2) how a Christian relates to a local church
- 3) that this relationship is formal

What is meant by *formal*? A formal relationship can be publicly recognized. It goes beyond a private commitment of the heart. A couple who is dating may be fully committed to one another in their hearts, yet this doesn't mean they are married. When a couple gets married, their relationship 'goes public'. They and those around them can point to a legal document or a set of witnessed vows to show that their relationship has been formalized. It is only when this relationship is formalized that all the benefits and responsibilities of marriage are fully realized.

The same is true in the church. A private desire for fellowship within a local church is commendable, but true belonging must involve a formally recognized relationship, what we call church membership. But is this biblical?

The purpose of this document is to demonstrate that this definition of membership is biblical and that if membership isn't *formal*, the biblical pattern for Christian discipleship becomes impossible.

How the Christian and the local church relate to one another

The Christian and the congregation

We will turn first to 1 Corinthians 5 to see that church membership shows us how the individual Christian relates to the local church. In this text, Paul is writing to the Corinthian church to correct them. One of their members had fallen into grievous, public, and unrepentant sin and instead of dealing with that sin, they prided themselves in overlooking it. Paul commanded the church to remove this man from the church "so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord" (v. 5). The purpose was to rescue this

¹ <https://www.9marks.org/article/what-is-church-membership/>

man from his sin which was leading him away from the Lord. Another purpose was to protect the church from this man's sin spreading to the whole church (v. 6, 13).

The question before us is this: How do we know who the church is responsible to disciple in this way? Is the church suppose to treat every immoral person in the same way? The answer is, "No." Paul writes: "I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people – not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world" (v. 9-10). And again in v. 12, "For what have I to do with judging outsiders?" This type of discipleship is not for the 'world' or for 'outsiders'. It is for "anyone who bears the name of brother" (v. 11) and for "those inside the church" (v. 12).

Paul assumed that the Corinthian church knew exactly who was inside the church and who was not. How did they know who was inside? It wasn't simply those who attended. In 1 Corinthians 14:23, Paul envisions a scenario where the *church* gathers, and *outsiders* are present. Every Sunday, the gathered assembly is comprised of the *church* (insiders) and *outsiders*. This means that the members of the church are known, their relationship to the congregation is *formal* in nature. Church membership tells the church which Christians they are responsible to disciple, and church membership gives the Christian assurance that there is a specific local church who is watching over their soul. In membership, the individual Christian commits to living out their Christian life under the submission of a specific local church. If this commitment is not formal, the local church will not know who they are responsible for.

The Christian and the leadership

Formal church membership also tells the Elders of a local church who they will give an account for.

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. (Hebrews 13:17)

Who are the elders responsible to watch over? For whom will they give an account? If half the members no longer attend or if a church doesn't practice membership at all, how will a pastor know who God has entrusted into his care? There is a sense in which an elder is responsible to minister to everybody who gathers in the building. But people come and people go. In any given year, a church might have 300 people attending at least once but only 80 people on a Sunday morning. Is he responsible for the one-time visitors in the same way he is to others? What about those who cannot attend because of health reasons? Formal membership is how the elders know who they will give an account for. Church membership is, among other things, a relationship between a particular Christian and a body of elders in which the Christian invites the leadership of the elders and the elders commit to watching of the soul of the Christian.

Who shares in the authority of the local church?

Authority to bind and loose

Our definition of church membership stated that the local church is to affirm and oversee a Christian's discipleship. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul calls the local church to *withdraw* their affirmation of one particular disciple. They were to remove him from among them (v. 2). They were to "deliver this man to Satan", which means to remove him from the protection of the church (v. 5). They were to not associate with him (v. 11). They were to judge him and purge him from their midst (v. 12-13). We might object. Who gives the church the right to do this? The answer is that God does. In v. 4 Paul writes, "When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of the Lord Jesus" then they are to remove this man. When the church gathers, the authority of Jesus himself is present.

In the context of church discipline, Jesus speaks these words:

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. 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. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.

Binding and loosing refer here to affirming and dis-affirming those who profess faith in Christ. The local church has the authority to pronounce judgement on those within the local church who fall into grievous unrepentant sin because this sin shows that they are not truly following the Lord. This is a great and fearful responsibility.

Who possesses this authority? This authority is not given to the pastor, to the elders, or to some church oversight team. The final decision to receive and remove members of the local church belongs to the local church itself. Church membership tells us who shares in that authority. In 2 Corinthians 2:5-8, we see that the immoral brother of 1 Corinthians 5 has repented.

Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure--not to put it too severely--to all of you. For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.

We see here the nature of the responsibility of the church to the individual Christian. Removing this sinner was for the purpose of his repentance, and now that has happened. Therefore, the church is to reaffirm him. They are to once more affirm him as brother in Christ. We also see again who has this responsibility and authority. It was the "majority" of the church who disciplined this man. If a majority could be calculated, then the church must have known precisely who was inside the church. This knowledge requires formal church membership.

Authority to represent

The authority of the church goes beyond areas of discipline. Formal church membership is like giving a passport to its members. When an individual member lives and acts in the world, they represent Christ on behalf of the local church. In the case of the unrepentant sinner, he must be removed for his own good but also for the purity of the church. The Corinthian church had the authority to say that this man did not represent them and did not represent Christ in his sinful actions.

When Donald Trump first entered the presidential race, he stated that he was attending Marble Collegiate Church. The church released a statement indicating that while Trump has a history with the church, he is not a current active member. In doing so, they were exercising their authority to declare who represents them and who doesn't. Their statement was not a judgment on Trump, either for the good or for the bad. The local church has no authority over the outside world, but they do have the authority to declare who represents them in the world. Without formal church membership, this authority could not exist.

Conclusion

Let's remind ourselves of the definition of church membership:

"Church membership is a formal relationship between a local church and a Christian characterized by the church's affirmation and oversight of a Christian's discipleship and the Christian's submission to living out his or her discipleship in the care of the church."

We have seen that the church is to affirm and oversee a Christian's discipleship. We have seen that a Christian is to submit to and live out his or her Christian life in the care of a local church. And we have seen that to do this, the church must know who is inside the church. This knowledge is church membership. The membership directory tells the church and the world who has entered into that sort of relationship in a particular local church.

A shepherd was entrusted with 100 sheep. He knew them by name. There were other sheep in the pastures, but these sheep were part of his flock. And he was responsible for them. One day he noticed that one had gone astray. He had wandered from the green pastures and was outside of the protection of the flock. This shepherd loved every sheep and so he went out in search of that sheep. He stopped at nothing until the sheep was restored to the flock where it was safe (Matthew 18:12-14).

Formal church membership is counter-cultural. It demands that we submit to a group of imperfect people. It demands that we are accountable to others. It demands that we seek the good of others, not just ourselves. It demands that we commit to loving a particular group of repenting sinners. But this is Jesus' plan to grow us in holiness and to keep us in him until that day when our faith is made sight.