Church Membership
Scripture: Selected Scriptures
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A GRACE COMMUNITY CHURCH DISTINCTIVE

In a day whencommitment is a rare commodity, it should come as no surprise that church membership is such a low priority to so many believers. Sadly, it is not uncommon for Christians to move from church to church, never submitting themselves to the care of elders and never committing themselves to a group of fellow believers.

To neglect—or to refuse—to join a church as a formal member, however, reflects a misunderstanding of the believer's responsibility to the body of Christ. And it also cuts one off from the many blessings and opportunities that flow from this commitment. It is essential for every Christian to understand what church membership is and why it matters.

The Definition of Church Membership

When an individual is saved, he becomes a member of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). Because he is united to Christ and the other members of the body in this way, he is therefore qualified to become member of a local expression of that body.

To become a member of a church is to formally commit oneself to an identifiable, local body of believers who have joined together for specific, divinely ordained purposes. These purposes include receiving instruction from God's Word (1 Tim. 4:13; 2 Tim. 4:2), serving and edifying one another through the proper use of spiritual gifts (Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:4-31; 1 Pet. 4:10-11), participating in the ordinances (Luke 22:19; Acts 2:38-42), and proclaiming the gospel to those who are lost (Matt. 28:18- 20). In addition, when one becomes a member of a church, he submits himself to the care and the authority of the biblically qualified elders that God has placed in that assembly.

The Basis for Church Membership

Although Scripture does not contain an explicit command to formally join a local church, the biblical foundation for church membership permeates the New Testament. This biblical basis can be seen most clearly in (1) the example of the early church, (2) the existence of church government, (3) the exercise of church discipline, and (4) the exhortation to mutual edification.

The Example of the Early Church

In the early church, coming to Christ was coming to the church. The idea of experiencing salvation without belonging to a local church is foreign to the New Testament. When individuals repented and believed in Christ, they were baptized and added to the church (Acts 2:41, 47; 5:14; 16:5). More than simply living out a private commitment to Christ, this meant joining together formally with other believers in a local assembly and devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer (Acts 2:42).

The epistles of the New Testament were written to churches. In the case of the few written to individuals—such as Philemon, Timothy and Titus—these individuals were leaders in churches. The New Testament epistles themselves demonstrate that the Lord assumed that believers would be committed to a local assembly. There is also evidence in the New Testament that just as there was a list of widows eligible for financial support (1 Tim. 5:9), there may also have been a list of members that grew as people were saved (cf. Acts 2:41, 47; 5:14; 16:5). In fact, when a believer moved to another city, his church often wrote a letter of commendation to his new church (Acts 18:27; Rom. 16:1; Col. 4:10; cf. 2 Cor. 3:1-2).

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In the book of Acts, much of the terminology fits only with the concept of formal church membership. Phrases such as "the whole congregation" (6:5), "the church in Jerusalem" (8:1), "the disciples" in Jerusalem (9:26), "in every church" (14:23), "the whole church" (15:17), and "the elders of the church" in Ephesus (20:17), all suggest recognizable church membership with well-defined boundaries (also see 1 Cor. 5:4; 14:23; and Heb. 10:25).

The Existence of Church Government

The consistent pattern throughout the New Testament is that a plurality of elders is to oversee each local body of believers. The specific duties given to these elders presuppose a clearly defined group of church members who are under their care.

Among other things, these godly men are responsible to shepherd God's people (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2), to labor diligently among them (1 Thess. 5:12), to have charge over them (1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 5:17), and to keep watch over their souls (Heb. 13:17). Scripture teaches that the elders will give an account to God for the individuals allotted to their charge (Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:3).

Those responsibilities require that there be a distinguishable, mutually understood membership in the local church. Elders can shepherd the people and give an account to God for their spiritual well-being only if they know who they are; they can provide oversight only if they know those for whom they are responsible; and they can fulfill their duty to shepherd the flock only if they know who is part of the flock and who is not.

The elders of a church are not responsible for the spiritual well-being of every individual who visits the church or who attends sporadically. Rather, they are primarily responsible to shepherd those who have submitted themselves to the care and the authority of the elders, and this is done through church membership.

Conversely, Scripture teaches that believers are to submit to their elders. Hebrews 13:17 says, "Obey your leaders, and submit to them." The question for each believer is, "Who are your leaders?" The one who has refused to join a local church and entrust himself to the care and the authority of the elders has no leaders. For that person, obedience to Hebrews 13:17 is impossible. To put it simply, this verse implies that every believer knows to whom he must submit, which, in turn, assumes clearly defined church membership.

The Exercise of Church Discipline

In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus outlines the way the church is to seek the restoration of a believer who has fallen into sin—a four-step process commonly known as church discipline. First, when a brother sins, he is to be confronted privately by a single individual (v. 15). If he refuses to repent, that individual is to take one or two other believers along to confront him again (v. 16). If the sinning brother refuses to listen to the two or three, they are then to tell it to the church (v. 17). If there is still no repentance, the final step is to put the person out of the assembly (v. 17; cf. 1 Cor. 5:1-13).

The exercise of church discipline according to Matthew 18 and other passages (1 Cor. 5:1-13; 1 Tim. 5:20; Titus 3:10-11) presupposes that the elders of a church know who their members are. For example, the elders of Grace Community Church have neither the responsibility nor the authority to discipline a member of the church down the street. Sadly, the widespread lack of understanding of church membership has made it necessary for our elders to discipline not only formal members but also those who regularly fellowship at Grace Community Church. However, the Bible's teaching on

church discipline assumes church membership.

The Exhortation to Mutual Edification

The New Testament teaches that the church is the body of Christ, and that God has called every member to a life devoted to the growth of the body. In other words, Scripture exhorts all believers to edify the other members by practicing the “one-anothers” of the New Testament (e.g., Heb. 10:24-25) and exercising their spiritual gifts (Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 12:4-7; 1 Pet. 4:10-11). Mutual edification can only take place in the context of the corporate body of Christ. Exhortations to this kind of ministry presuppose that believers have committed themselves to other believers in a specific local assembly. Church membership is simply the formal way to make that commitment.

Conclusion

Living out a commitment to a local church involves many responsibilities: exemplifying a godly lifestyle in the community, exercising one’s spiritual gifts in diligent service, contributing financially to the work of the ministry, giving and receiving admonishment with meekness and in love, and faithfully participating in corporate worship. Much is expected, but much is at stake. For only when every believer is faithful to this kind of commitment is the church able to live up to her calling as Christ’s representative here on earth. To put it simply, membership matters.

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