

Seven reasons for Church Membership

OUTLINE

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INTRODUCTION

This morning we are beginning a refresher course on membership or being part of the church. So today I would like to begin and give us seven reasons why membership is biblical. I used to be one who believed that membership of the local church was an unbiblical innovation that true biblical Christians should cast off, just as they have cast off many man made practices of the Roman Catholic Church. Today I stand before convinced of the opposite position.

We live in a day and age that has seen the death of many important and biblical teachings. This has happened for a number of reasons. Firstly, we are in an age that has been deeply impacted by individualism. This has impacted our understanding of our relationship with the church to such an extent that you will find Christians who believe that they don't need the church, or preachers, or baptism, or the Lord's Supper, or church discipline, or membership, or many of the other things that relate to being part of the church. They think that because they have the Holy Spirit and a bible that is all they need. They couldn't be more wrong. Unfortunately they have emphasized being a part of the invisible church at the expense of being part of the visible church. Secondly, another reason why church related issues have suffered in our modern age is on account of an attempt to unify various denominations in certain endeavours like missions, evangelism, worship events, etc. And as soon as you seek unity with people from varying denominations what do you have to sacrifice in order to do evangelism together? Things like baptism, views on church government, membership, etc. are the first to be chucked. Thirdly, as Christians we have grown very shallow in our approach to the scriptures and have fallen into a text proof approach to Scripture. The trouble with this approach is that not every doctrine we hold has a clear unambiguous proof text to prove it. For example, think of the Trinity. The word Trinity does not occur in the Scriptures, nor is there a particular verse that teaches that God exists as One God in three persons, this is language that we have come up with as we have wrestled with the inferences of a number of verses. We might be able to find one verse that proves the deity of Christ, then another to prove that the Holy Spirit is eternal implying His deity. We can find Scriptures that teach the equality of the Father with the Son, but have to go to other Scriptures to find the equality of the Spirit with the Father. We piece it together but can't have one neat verse that says it all. It is often the case that it is only when a doctrine is

disputed that we find nice and succinct verses that say it all. Paul gives us many verses that teach us that we are justified by faith because that was one of the major disputes that he faced, it was only several hundred years later that the doctrine of the Trinity came under attack and was formulated in the way we now hold. It is the same with church membership. There is no one verse that says 'Thou shalt become a committed member of a local church.' However, like the Trinity, there is grafted into the warp and woof of the NT church clear indications that church membership was practiced. It is my hope to piece these fragments together to give you what the NT reveals about the church and membership. I have eight lines of argument to prove that every Christian should be a committed member of a local church and not a free or wandering agent who is not committed to a particular church.

There are two basic assumptions that I am holding to, firstly, I disagree that the issues that relate to church structure are matters that are not mentioned in the Scriptures and therefore up for personal interpretation. Charles Finney held to a pragmatic view of church saying that God told us to fulfil the Great Commission but did not tell us how. This was his view which helped him introduce new measures into the church, namely the anxious seat which was an early forerunner to the altar call. The Bible is full of teaching that relates to the various structural aspects of the church. For example, we see that the church met together on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:1-2); that they believed that they should meet and not be individualistic (Hebrews 10:25); they had elections (Acts 6:1-7); Officers (Phil. 1:1); did church discipline (1 Cor. 5); took contributions (Rom. 15:26); wrote letters of commendation to communicate with other local churches (Acts 18:27; 2 Cor. 3:1); administered the ordinances (Acts 2:41; 1 Cor. 11:23-26); kept a role for the widows (1 Tim. 5:9-11), and the number of those who were in the church (Acts 2:47), amongst other things. That the bible is sufficient and authoritative for us in these issues. Secondly, I am assuming that church membership is made of those who are born again. The invisible church consists of those who are born again and united to Christ wherever they may be. The visible church, that is the concrete local expressions of the universal and invisible church should be made up of only those who are true believers. The Bible acknowledges only those who are born again and united to Christ as disciples and truly a child of Abraham and therefore part of the true church. The church we see in the NT is not a church made up of particular nations, parents with their unbelieving children, or any old heretic that says they are a Christian, but it consists of those who make a credible confession of faith joining themselves together with others who so confess the faith in a community of saints.

The role of elders

The first area which presupposes Christians belonging to local bodies is the role of the elders who rules over local flocks of God's people. We see in Hebrews 13:17 that the elder is to be submitted to in the various congregations, '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.' So let us take the typical wandering Christian who goes to church like they go to restaurants, they go

where their palates take them. Let's say they attend 2-3 different churches because they say, 'The church is not a building it's the people,' and 'I don't need to be in any one place to be a Christian.' The question that we have to ask such a Christian is, are you in submission to *your* elders. Can you identify *your* elders? This question can be reversed, you're your elders identify you as part of the flock or not? Obedience to your elders does not include obedience in every area of life like who you should marry, but it does have to do with whether you are to be baptised, admitted to the Lord's table and put under discipline. Are you accountable to elders that God gives to His church to ensure the health of your soul on these sorts of issues? People who are not committed at a church and identified with a particular body have the problem of having to submit to all the elders of all the churches they attend, or none.

There is not just one verse that speaks of this, listen to Peter, 1 Peter 5:2-3, 'shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; 3 not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.' Who is under my charge, whose souls am I to give an account for? Am I accountable for the souls of every Christian in every local church in Timaru, and for that matter New Zealand? Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to submit, not to all the elders of the church, but the ones that are set over them specifically, 1 Thess. 5:12-13, 'We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, 13 and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.' Acts 20:28 says the same thing, 'Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.' Can you identify your elders, but can your elders identify you are part of their particular flock? The Holy Spirit gives specific elders to specific flocks, if you do not belong to a church you are not keeping in step with what the Spirit is doing in the churches. God has given the gift of pastors and teachers to the church to edify them, if you are not under elders and teachers then you are doing something different to the way church was done in the NT.

Imagine you were here today and were unrepentant in sin, and I came to you and urged you to repent, if you say to me, 'I don't have to listen you,' then you are not in submission to the eldership nor do you identify yourself with this church. Are you a sheep without a shepherd? Are you in that dangerous place of being accountable to no one, this is not God's provision for you, He sets the orphans in families, he puts under-shepherds over them to care for and feed them, to pray for them and discipline them. Membership is your identifying yourself with a local expression of God's visible church and availing yourself of the care and oversight of a godly eldership. Elders are those who will defend you from false teaching, who will rebuke you when you sin, will walk with you when you hurt, feed you upon the word and pray for you regularly. Are you a spiritual orphan or part of a family?

Exclusion assumes inclusion

Part of the reason why membership is unpopular is because church discipline is unpopular. How can a person be removed from fellowship if there was nothing defining them as part of

the fellowship? If you look at the various verses that talk about church membership, you will see that in all of them a distinct identifiable group is the church and it is they who have the responsibility to carry out the necessary discipline. Matt. 18:15-17, "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. 16 But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." Notice that the third step is to bring the matter to the church after you have tried to sort it out privately. It is the church that is involved in the disciplining process. But here is the problem, who do we identify as the church if there is no membership? If we take everyone who arrives on a Sunday, are we to include all the children in this definition? Are we to include every visitor who says they are a Christian in this definition? What about the unsaved that may be present? No, it is necessary that there is an approved group of people who are identified as the church, those who profess faith, have been baptised and on account of their credible confession of faith have been accepted as part of the fellowship.

In another text that deals with church discipline, 1 Cor. 5 we see that Paul distinguishes between insiders and outsiders, V12, 'For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?' But tell me, how are we to judge those who are insiders to the church if we are unwilling to define who is a member? There can be no exclusion without identifiable inclusion.

'We all need a group of Christians who will help hold us accountable. Taking vows of church membership invites fellow believers to hold you accountable to live as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Some may reply, "Well, that's all the more reason not to join a church. I don't want the church breathing down my neck if I fall into some sin." But the mutual accountability and discipline that flow from a covenant of church membership are intended for our ultimate good.

Earl Blackburn, a Baptist pastor in California, tells a story of a particular Sunday when his church excommunicated a man for beating his wife and not showing repentance. The church leadership announced the man's excommunication during the morning worship service. On that particular Sunday there happened to be a family visiting the church for the first time. After the service, the man of that family walked up to Pastor Blackburn in tears. He said, "I want to become a member of this church. I need to become a member."

When Blackburn asked him "why?" the man explained, "I've never seen anything like this, and I believe it is so biblical. Let me tell you about myself. I'm on a worship team in a big megachurch in this area. I've committed adultery on my wife two times. By the mercy of God, both times she's taken me back. The senior pastor and the pastoral staff all knew about me having an affair with the woman in this church, but they didn't stop me from being on the worship team. I had two different affairs with two different women. Everyone on the pastoral staff and everyone on the worship team knew about me having these affairs. I continued to play every Saturday evening and every Sunday morning on the

worship team and no one said a word. I had no fear of God. And after they did nothing the first time it was easier for me to do it the second time. The church knew about it and the church condoned it. They didn't like it, but they didn't do anything about it. And no one came to me. It was a brother with whom I worked, who was not a member of this church, who kept confronting me with Scripture. This is what led to my repentance" (9 Marks Audio Interview).¹

Identifiable number of saints

In the book of Acts we see that there is an identifiable number of saints. In acts 1 we see that Judas was 'numbered' with the 12 apostles (1:17), but on account of his death we see that the church sought a replacement for him, once Matthias is chosen he is 'numbered with the eleven apostles.' This is an identifiable group of approved people. When the church grew later on in the book of Acts we see it recorded this way, 'And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.' (Acts 2:47). It was this 'number' that is said to have experienced revival and all of their needs being met, 4:32-35, 'Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. 33 And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. 34 There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold 35 and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.' Once again an identifiable group of those who associated together and were not loners or floaters with a non-committal attitude. It was this same number that was called upon to choose the first deacons in the church, 'And the twelve summoned *the full number* of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. 3 Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. 4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." 5 And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. 6 These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.' (Acts 6:2-6). Notice how this group has a number and is entrusted with spiritual responsibility in choosing deacons, hardly an unidentifiable bunch of possible Christians. It should not be strange of us to think of a 'number' in the early church, God Himself keeps a register of His people, Ps. 87:6, 'The LORD records as he registers the peoples, "This one was born there." Selah'

Descriptions of the church

1(http://www.alliancenet.org/partner/Article_Display_Page/0,,PTID307086_CHID750054_CIID2094578,01churchmem.html)

If we take the various descriptions of the church we find that the pictures used to describe the church speak of the unity that should typify us. The church is described as a body, 1 Cor. 12:12-13, '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. 13 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.' This implies that we are to be interconnected with each other, and more than just a casual acquaintance, 'For the body does not consist of one member but of many. 15 If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. 16 And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? 18 But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. 19 If all were a single member, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." (v14-20). Does this description of the church as a body describe your interaction and contribution to the local church? Or are you an organ in a jar, an organ without a body?

Then we have the idea of the church as a family when it is called the household of God, 1 Tim. 3:14-15, 'I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, 15 if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.' Are you part of a spiritual family, interacting with your local church not as a group of friends that you have chosen, but people to which you have an eternal bond in the Spirit, people like your brothers and sisters who are blood, and to whom you are bound and obliged?

Other pictures include a temple made of living stones of which we are all a part; various flocks given by the Holy Spirit who have overseers appointed by God, a sheep on his/her own is vulnerable; we are branches in the vine, grafted into Christ with each other. All these and more argue for a tightly knit community that is interdependent and relates to each other on the most intimate terms. It is this reality that is behind membership and is lacking in our individualistic age.

Edification of others

Church is the place where we not only get but give. God has entrusted us with certain gifts that we are to use to serve our brethren, 1 Cor.12:7, 'To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.' The elders will regulate who can and can't serve based on who is saved and unsaved, mature enough or immature, and who is committed and here to stay and who is a tourist. Mark Dever puts it this way, 'In our church's membership class I often tell the story of a friend who worked for a campus Christian ministry while attending a church in which I was a member. He would always slip in right after the hymns, sit there for the sermon, and then leave. I asked him one day, why he didn't come for the whole service. "Well," he said, "I don't get any- thing out of the rest of it." "Have you ever thought about joining the church?" I responded. He thought that was just an absurd question. He said,

“Why would I join the church? If I join them, I think they would just slow me down spiritually.” When he said this I wondered what he understood being a Christian to mean. I replied, “Have you ever considered that maybe God wants you to link arms with those other people? Sure, they might slow you down, but you might help to speed them up. Maybe that’s part of God’s plan for us as we live together as Christians!”² some have used the picture of a hitchhiker who freeloads by getting a free ride but does not have to pay or provide a car.

Necessary for witness

Jesus tells us that our identity as a definable love community is vital to our witness in the world, John 13:25, ‘By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.’ The word disciples is the word most often used to describe the church in Acts. It is a word that speaks of one who is baptised, who is in fellowship with the church, who is committed to holiness, who prays with the saints, partakes of the Lord’s Supper and sits under the apostle’s teaching. This is the word used to describe, not drifters, not the children of believers, not those who stay at home refusing to be baptised and meet with God’s people on the Lord’s Day and have Joyce Meyer as their TV pastor. It is crucial for us to be a tight knit community. If you don’t phone or meet with another person in the church who is not your direct family or a friend who fellowships here at CGBC, I suggest to you that you are failing this commandment. You cannot be so intimately involved in the lives of the others here so to fulfil this commandment. Belonging to a local church means a commitment to a group of people to fulfil this command, to a definable committed group of disciples who are in covenant with each other. We are to give outward expression to the oneness we have and will eternally enjoy in our love for one another. This will not happen if church is merely a preaching post to hear stuff you like to hear but have no interaction with the people.

The church is not to be made up of fairweather Christians who will leave as soon as they don’t like something in a particular congregation. Without people who are committed to a body it will be virtually impossible for us to fulfil our call to take the Gospel to all nations. In order to be the support for missionary as a church we need a group of people who are committed to giving, praying and going. An attitude to the local church that sees it as optional undermines God’s intention for the church to fulfil the great commission not the horrible state of affairs where parachurch organizations go around fleecing the flock pulling our financial commitments in every direction so that everyone is already individually committed that we can do nothing as a church.

Vital for making important decisions as a church

For our last point I want to show you why it is essential practically to have a committed identifiable group of approved Christians as the make up of the local church. It would be impossible to honour the Bible’s teaching on the congregations involvement in decision

2 Mark Dever, *A Display of God’s Glory*, p50-51.

making if we did not have an approved membership. Think of these examples. Let's say that this church wants to call another pastor after I leave, and I have no intentions of leaving any time soon. It is the church under the direction of the leadership who will vote for who should be accepted. Who should be able to vote? Every person who comes on a Sunday? Should the children, the visitors, those who followed the last preacher because he agreed with all their doctrinal issues, those who would leave as soon as minor issues were disagreed on, those who were baptised as babies, call themselves Christians but who have never been converted? And I am sure I could add to that list. If we were in a Congregationalist paedobaptist church where many babies are baptised and then moved through confirmation into membership, they are approved to vote but may not even be saved. I hope you agree that the calling of the pastor is very important and should not be left in the hands of those whose spiritual condition and commitment to his financial needs and the long haul are in question.

We as a church bought another church building to renovate. Who should get to vote if we build, or sell. Should it be those who are unsaved, those who are uncommitted, those whose spiritual state is in question. This is not a matter for the elders to decide because the financial commitment comes from the whole church. Who will approve to bind themselves to a bond if necessary in that situation? It should be those who are committed and have shown that commitment in binding themselves to this congregation. Membership is merely making open what God has done by His Spirit. We are members of one another, we are a family, membership is merely a formalizing of something that already exists.

What about church discipline? Who should get a say in who gets disciplined for impenitent sin in the church? Matt 18:17 clearly tells us that the church should decide, but tell me, who are they? Every person sitting here, every visitor, every fairweather Christian who goes wherever the preaching agrees with them; every child? Most certainly not! Membership is merely the distinguishing of those who are truly believers and who are truly committed to the church not merely themselves and their opinions.

I have said enough. If you are a Christian you should be committed to a local body, approved for voting, in submission to elders and accountable for discipline, you should be someone who comes not only to get but to give with your time, talents, prayers and dollars for the glory of God.