

Is Church Membership Biblical?

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The short answer is, “Yes!”

However, if you are in the mood to read a longer answer, here are some biblical reasons to affirm the concept of local church membership.

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Membership Tallies in Acts

Where better to turn for information on what the church is than the book that describes its founding? Even from the day of Pentecost, the church in Jerusalem was keeping track of how many were added to their number.

⁴¹So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. ... ^{47b}And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

— Acts 2:41,47b ESV

One who rejects church membership might be inclined to regard this merely as the number of people baptized or the number of people identifying as Christian. However, later in the same book, we see that these are people who belong to particular churches, not just the church at large.

⁵So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.

— Acts 16:5 ESV

Some consider it too much to suggest that the early church would actually keep formal records of such things. Of course, a formal record is not necessary for membership to exist, but it's worth noting that they were in the habit of maintaining rolls for other purposes, such as keeping a list of needy widows (1 Timothy 5:9).

The Analogy of the Body

The Bible describes the church as the body of Christ, and Christians as members of that body.

⁴For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, ⁵so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

— Romans 12:4–5 ESV

²⁷Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

— 1 Corinthians 12:27 ESV

One could point out that this is just talking about the universal church, composed of all Christians regardless of which assembly they attend. However, both of these passages in their larger contexts address how local churches ought to operate. In other words, participation in Christ's body happens through membership in a local church.

One day, all the members of Christ's universal body will be gathered together, but at the moment we find our togetherness primarily in local assemblies.

The Responsibility of Pastors to Laymen

The duty God assigns to pastors makes no practical sense apart from church membership.

²⁸Pay 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.

— Acts 20:28 ESV

²shepherd 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;

— 1 Peter 5:2 ESV

Who, precisely, is a pastor supposed to pastor? He cannot pastor every Christian on the planet since he does not have the capacity to. He cannot pastor all who show up in a church on a given Sunday because the work of truly caring for someone requires a level of relationship that must extend beyond a mere day. If he is to “exercise oversight,” he must have some means and authority to do so. For anyone who is not committed to a particular church, such an oversight would not only be difficult to conduct, but intrusive.

Even the notion of a “flock of God that is among you” and “the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers” refers to a particular congregation with particular borders. Whatever those borders are, they define membership.

The Responsibility of Laymen to Pastors

God instructs Christians to submit to elders. Once again, one cannot meaningfully fulfill this duty apart from membership in a local church.

¹⁷Obey 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 ESV

A Christian cannot, nor is required to, heed every pastor. No one has the time for such an endeavor, and the instruction of different pastors will vary, stripping the command of any real meaning. Additionally, if a Christian has the ability to immediately, at will, change which pastor is his pastor, then no real obligation can be found in this verse. For example, if I don't like what my pastor says, I could just decide that today he will not be my pastor.

The author of Hebrews clearly assumes that he addresses people who have entered into a committed relationship to each other by and through the local church.

The Responsibility of Christians to Each Other

The “one another”s in the New Testament have little shape outside of the commitment of church membership.

²Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

— Galatians 6:2 ESV

¹⁶Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

— Colossians 3:16 ESV

¹¹Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

— 1 Thessalonians 5:11 ESV

Once again, a Christian cannot bear the burdens of all Christians, encourage all Christians, or sing to all Christians, etc. He could theoretically do these things with all Christians he encounters, but this would not match the kind of intimate fellowship we see in Scripture. Instead, there has to be some particular group one regularly engages with in these activities, and with some level of commitment. While people may disagree about that level of commitment, there is no reason not to call it what it is: membership.

The Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper is, in part, a statement about our unity with each other.

¹⁷Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

— 1 Corinthians 10:17 ESV

If this communion is a formal recognition of others as believers, then there must be some formal qualification. Of course, it's commonplace for many churches who do not practice membership (and even many who do) to invite all who claim to have faith to partake of the Lord's Supper. But what is to keep anyone from making that claim if no one is responsible for judging that their life does not accord with the gospel?

The Apostle Paul states plainly that there is a distinction between those inside the church and those outside the church, and that this "insideness"—i.e., membership—determines whether one should be admitted to the table.

¹¹But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. ¹²For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?

— 1 Corinthians 5:11–12 ESV

Church Discipline

On a similar note, one of the marks of a true church is discipline, the practice of handling a fellow disciple who is unrepentant (cf. Matthew 18:15–22). Many recognize this as a duty of the church, but are unclear on what discipline actually is. Regardless of what additional practices a church has, excommunication is simply a formal statement that one does not belong to a particular church.

⁹I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— ¹⁰not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. ¹¹But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. ¹²For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? ¹³God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.”

— 1 Corinthians 5:9-13 ESV

If some is removed from the church, it means that formerly they belonged. Regardless of what level of formality associated this belonging, it is essentially the concept of membership. If a church has no members—i.e., no one “inside the church”—whom may it excommunicate?

Disciplinary Judgments

In fact, the decision-making process of discipline itself requires church membership because it requires there be a known set of people who belong who have the authority to decide the matter. Some imagine that church discipline may be sufficiently executed by the pastors/elders deciding whether to excommunicate someone. On the contrary, the Bible requires that the whole church participate.

¹⁵“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. ¹⁶But 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. ¹⁷If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. ...

— Matthew 18:15–17a ESV

In Matthew 18, Jesus depicts widening circles addressing the unrepentant man. First, one person. Second, one or two others, totaling to two or three witnesses (cf. Deuteronomy 17:6; Matthew 18:20). Third, the whole church. The whole church here is a larger group, not a different group of one pastor or two or three elders.

Paul also speaks of the whole church gathering to make such judgments.

⁴When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

— 1 Corinthians 5:4–5 ESV

Note that 1 Corinthians along with most of Paul's epistles were addressed to whole churches rather than just to the pastors or elders. This includes Galatians, where the church is instructed to pronounce a judgment against a false gospel (Galatians 1:8–9). How could the church do such a thing if it is uncertain who particularly belongs to the church?

To make any of these judgments, there must be a vote, and it must be clear who is permitted to vote. In fact Paul speaks of such a vote when he encourages the church in Corinth to restore the man excommunicated in 1 Corinthians 5.

²For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough,
— 2 Corinthians 6:2 ESV

What is the majority here? It is not a majority that complied with the decision against a minority who didn't; Paul would not tolerate such disunity. Rather, it is a majority that decided—i.e., voted—that the man would be excommunicated.

Such decisions to add or remove a person from the church are weighty matters. It would not be orderly for the decision to be made simply by whoever decided to show up that day regardless of who they are. These things need to be weighed by those who are taught by the Spirit and have the mind of Christ. They must be decided by those who have been formally recognized by the assembly to have such status.

Officer Selection

Finally, the New Testament design of church officer selection can't exist without membership. Specifically, the Bible depicts the church as a whole deciding matters of church office, and it would be impossible to make such judgments if it were unknown who specifically belongs to the church and has authority to contribute their own vote.

We see one example of this in Acts 6, where the apostles have the church—i.e., the members of the church—pick for them men who will administer the resources owned by the church. These are essentially the first deacons of the church.

² 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.

— Acts 6:2–3 ESV

Identifying leaders is the collective responsibility of the individual persons of a local congregation. Apart from church membership, it would not be clear who should have a say in this.

Common Objections

Beyond the matter of whether membership is biblical, there are several common objections to membership.

I can serve God sufficiently without membership: As stated above, you cannot submit to elders or care for one another as Christ has called without having some particular commitment to a local fellowship. Furthermore, if a matter of discipline came up, would you be able to vote as the New Testament prescribes? If the answer is no, then by your own rejection of membership, you are not able to serve God as he has called.

Church membership enables abuse: It's true that the commitments of church membership have been used to emotionally manipulate members and foster cult-like environments. However, the misuse of a thing does not make it wrong. If Christ has commanded membership, then people should join a church regardless of whatever fears they have. Good churches should have mechanisms in place to protect members from such abuses, and you can always ask about such things before joining.

I'm not sure I've found the right church: There is no perfect church, and the Bible nowhere commands you to join the best church you can. In fact, depending on how God has gifted you, if you really want to look out for the needs of others, perhaps you should even consider joining a church that has even more imperfections than the church down the street. If you are attending a church and not sure whether to join it, speak with a pastor and tell him about your situation. He will most likely be able to offer other church recommendations nearby and guide you through the process. Spending time in indecision is spending time in disobedience.

I'm not sure how long I'll be living in this area: Church membership is still a command regardless of how transient you are. Once again, if you are attending a church, speak with a pastor

and see what recommendations he has. Many churches provide a transfer process that allows someone to remain a member while in the process of moving.

I'm not sure I can live up to the commitments of church membership: No one is perfect. Each church is simply a society of forgiven people on the path of sanctification. If you have put your faith in Christ and are ready to fight this spiritual battle against sin and temptation, you will fit right in, regardless of how far along you are in your Christian walk.

Conclusion

Church membership in the times of the New Testament may not have looked exactly like it often does today, yet it could not have been far off. To follow the instruction of Christ in Scripture, we must have a clear understanding of who belongs to a given local church and who does not. The commitment of membership is a weighty one, but it is also a rewarding one.

¹⁰For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!

— Ecclesiastes 4:10 ESV

