

Church Membership

There are five primary questions that need to be answered in the context of church membership: What is the Church? What is a church? Is church membership biblical? Why belong to a church? What are the signs of a healthy church member?

I. What is the Church?

The Church is comprised of all who believe that Jesus Christ is God the Son, and who trust Him as their Lord and Savior. It is comprised of all believers throughout the world baptized into Christ and indwelt by His Spirit; the entire body, everyone who knows the Lord. All true born-again believers in Christ – justified by faith alone in Christ alone by God's grace alone for God's glory alone. We are all one in Christ no matter what local church or fellowship we belong to. We are the Bride of Christ and from every tribe and tongue on earth (Rev. 7:9).

II. What is a church?

A church is a community of born-again believers, under qualified leadership, who gather regularly for worship, growth and outreach. A localized expression of the Body of Christ living daily in relationship in a community; obeying the head of the church, Jesus and engages in preaching, teaching, baptism, Lord's Supper, and discipline. The true church of Jesus Christ, wherever it organizes and gathers, organically speaks of Christ in a local way – and collectively impacts the world globally. Think globally, live locally.

III. Is church membership biblical?

Is a formal, definable process by which church leadership identifies who is a part of that particular assembly something the Bible speaks to? It is not explicitly commanded so many see it as an option, not necessary. They may say, "I belong to the universal church; there is no need to be a member of a local church." Here are 9 reasons that imply the existence of a definable membership; a formal commitment to each other on the part of believers in a local church and on the part of the local church to the members.

1. The existence of church leadership. This assumes church leaders know who they are leading. Leaders need to "know their sheep", who they are accountable for. (Acts 20:28, 1 Cor 4.) Titus was told to appoint elders in every city (Titus 1:5). The Scriptures teach that elders, under God, have authority over the church, to be servant leaders, under-shepherds under the Chief Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Peter 5:1-11).
2. The existence of church followership. In order for there to be accountability to leadership, there must be an identifiable group to be accountable (Heb. 13:17). Paul referred to "churches" rather than one universal Church (Acts 16:5, 1 Cor. 14:33). *At Grace this includes but is not limited to being in agreement with our statement of faith as well as agreeing to voluntarily submit to the authority and oversight of church leadership. We also require Elders, Deacons and Deaconesses, and adult Bible teachers to be members.*
3. The existence of church lists. They kept a list of widows (1 Tim. 5:9). The church in Jerusalem chose from among themselves – How did they know who was among them? (Acts 6; Rom. 16:4).
4. The existence of a formal decision-making process (Acts 6; 2 Cor. 2:6).

5. The existence of a formal welcoming process, bringing one into fellowship (Gal. 2:9, right hands of fellowship; Acts 9, Barnabas advocating for Paul and the church receiving him).
6. The existence of a formal dismissal process. If you can be formally put out of something, it implies that you were formally put into it (1 Cor. 5:1-8). Margin of error, "he thought he was saved", even professing Christians can fall into gross sin.
7. The existence of the "one-another's". You can't do these alone or with people you are not associated with. These are ongoing disciplines, actions, effort put forth in close community with other believers.
8. The ordinances imply belonging. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are literally invitations to membership –to know and be known; recognized in a certain location by the people of God – giving testimony of your faith and living consistently before a group of like-minded people (Acts 2:41-44).
9. The body metaphor and the proper exercise of spiritual gifts (Rom. 12:4, 1 Cor. 12:5, 18, Eph. 4:25). Possibly the strongest explicit argument, 1 Cor. 12 speaks of members of the body. Paul refers to a local, not universal Body, a specific church, when body is used with reference to the church, it usually refers to a local assembly of believers. Being a member of a body is a church's public affirmation of a person's conversion. The Body is handicapped if all are not engaged – all have necessary gifts (1 Cor. 12:22-27).

IV. Why belong to a church?

Why should every believer be engaged, committed and accountable to a church? Why join a church, not just casually being a regular attendee? Why link arms with a church and say "For now, until God leads otherwise, I am here as a part of this body, committed to common life together in this community. These are my people, this is my family of faith"?

1. You are a part of the body. The body missing parts is incomplete. This church has everything God wants it to have today to fulfill His purposes in this community. "Follow Me" means join a group of disciples who together are God's people, the household of God, the family. Sanctification is a community project. You cannot be sanctified apart from the church. Heb. 10:25 talks about not neglecting meeting together. We can't obey all the biblical commands or use our gifts or accomplish what God wants us to without being part of a church.
2. You need the help of others in the body of Christ. Building up one another, teaching one another the Word of God. We are not to be lone ranger Christians. We need to be connected in this way if we are to fulfill our calling in the world.
3. You need to be equipped for ministry. Eph. 4:11-12 speaks of involvement based on your God-given spiritual gifts. We build other believers with our gifts, and we witness for the Lord through our gifts.
4. You need protection only the church can give (Heb. 13:17). Elders are charged with watching over your soul. You need accountability. You need to be in subjection to godly authority.
5. You strengthen the church by your presence rather than criticizing it in your absence. As long as you join for the right reasons, you join a house full of sinners saved by the grace of God. It is not enough to say "I am a member of the universal church" and leave it at that – you need the accountability and support of a group of people who can get to know you and vice-versa. It is what obedient Christians do. Regenerated people

seek out membership (whether formal or informal – whatever the leadership of a given local church has identified).

Some churches without formal membership processes know who is committed better than some churches with formal processes. Having it doesn't mean it is meaningful or lived out effectively. The founders of this church decided to have a formal, definable membership. We could as a group of elders (and then as a church) decide not to do that anymore but we have not, nor do we plan to. We believe it is a healthy practice to have a formal, definable membership. It is how we know who is with us. The main idea of church membership in a local body of believers centers on the idea of committed love and accountability.

John 13:34-35 “A new commandment I give you, love one another, as I have loved you.”

Eph. 4:16 “The whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.”

Church membership is implied and expected. Mark Dever says “the relationship between our membership in the universal church and our membership in the local church is a lot like the relationship between the righteousness God gives us through faith and the actual practice of righteousness in our daily lives. When we become Christians by faith, God declares us righteous. Yet we are still called to actively be righteous. A person who happily goes on living in unrighteousness calls into question whether he possessed Christ's righteousness in the first place. So, too, it is those who refuse to commit themselves to a local church.” Committing to a local body is a natural outcome – it confirms what Christ has done. John Stott said, “From the Day of Pentecost onward it has been clear that conversion to Christ means also conversion to the community of Christ, as people turn from themselves to Him, and from this corrupt generation to the alternative society which He is gathering around Himself. These two transfers – of personal allegiance and social membership – cannot be separated.”

V. What are the signs of a healthy church member?

What should a church expect from its members? There is a two-fold commitment...you to the church and the church to you. People must seek to belong to a local body and the church must extend a welcome. This is how committed love is displayed.

- A. Show up. Attend regularly. Heart, mind, body, soul. Love the Lord and your neighbor as yourself. Depend on and trust God. Hunger for His Word. Engage with His people. Get on board.
- B. Support others. Do the “one another's”. Know others, allow yourself to be known, get involved in lives. Give of your time, talents, treasure. Use gifts, skills, resources in serving, encouraging. Seek peace. Pursue reconciliation. Pray. Love as if you've never been hurt. Get in a group.
- C. Serve together from giftedness. On mission in the community and world – active ambassadors of Christ. No fence sitters. Get out and serve. Train people up and set them loose for active ministry.

Titus 2:14 says Jesus gave Himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for Himself A people that are His very own, eager to do what is good. Our understanding of the

gospel drives us to join together with a church. Milton Vincent says “the more I experience the gospel, the more there develops within me a yearning for my fellow-Christians who are also participating in the glories of the gospel. This affection for them comes loaded with confidence in their continued spiritual growth and ultimate glorification, and it becomes my pleasure to express to them this loving confidence regarding the ongoing work of God in their lives (Phil. 1:3-7).”

VI. Conclusion:

Every person who is a part of the Church needs to be an active part of a local church. You may be a member of a church in name and function, operating in a healthy way in a local body of believers. If so, keep doing that. Or you may be a member in name only, not functioning or contributing in any way; that is meaningless membership. You need to do some soul searching. An inactive member is an oxymoron – don't you need your right foot? Or you may be a member in function, but not in name, having never officially linked arms with us in the way the leadership has set up. It's simple – just do it. Or you may be uncommitted to the church. You may not be able because you are not a believer. You can't join with us. You can be present and enjoy relationships, but the life in Christ we have is foreign to you. We love you, we care about you and we want you to know Jesus and be a member of the family. You need to turn from your sins to Jesus and believe.

You may be a believer that for some reason remains uncommitted to this body of believers. Ask yourself, is the gospel affirmed, preached and lived here? Is the preaching faithful to Scripture? Would I want to find a spouse brought up under this church's teaching? Do I want my kids to grow up here? What picture of Christianity will they see? Biblical or a lot like the world? Can I minister and serve here? We all need to know how important the church is and to know our place in it. Those who believe Jesus Christ is God, who trust Him as Lord and Savior, are members of the Body of Christ. We welcome them as our brothers and sisters in the Lord and invite them to identify themselves with our fellowship at Grace Church.

We hope you will decide it is time to link arms and put your name on the line with us. It will be exciting to see what God will do. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book Life Together wrote, “It is by the grace of God that a congregation is permitted to gather visibly in this world... Not all Christians receive this blessing. The imprisoned, the sick, the scattered lonely, the proclaimers of the Gospel in heathen lands stand alone. They know that visible fellowship is a blessing. They remember, as the Psalmist did, how they went “with a multitude...to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise, with a multitude that kept holyday (Ps. 42:4)...Therefore, let him who until now has had the privilege of living in common Christian life with other Christians praise God's grace from the bottom of his heart. Let him thank God on his knees and declare: it is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren.”