

Church Membership:

Is Church Membership a Biblical Concept? Is the church anything more than a loose-knit group of free agents who believe the gospel? Yes! Christ organized his church into familial groups of members with governors, responsibilities, and loyalties. But, it is not uncommon to find professing Christians with no ties to a local church. This is often due to a misapplication of the doctrine of the invisible church, a prejudice against organized religion, the growth of parachurch ministries, a log in the eye, or a lack of regard for the visible church.

There are many bad models of church membership. One that is common among many home schoolers (I am a home schooler) is the patriarchal model, in which the family is the church. Dad takes on the role of Abraham. These families do not go to church, but stay at home to worship as a family.

The second bad model is the Theocratic model, in which national citizenship and church membership go hand in hand. For example Constantine made Christianity the national religion of the Roman empire. Historically, national citizenship has expressed itself as a religion in one degree or another.

The third approach is the consumer model, which dismisses the idea of church membership. Instead you go to church, get what you want, pay, and leave. You have no

more connection with the people and officers of the church than you do with the customers and employees of WalMart.

The fourth approach is the country club model, in which church membership carries little to no obligation, and the church roll is of no importance beyond the expectation of giving contributions to the church and the reciprocal right to vote in congregational meetings.

The fifth model is the cultic model, in which members are abused at the whim of their leader by being manipulated into doing things the Bible does not require or even forbids. The church leaders exercise an undue control over the lives of members.

Finally, a sixth model is the invisible-church-only model. Proponents of this view are often heard saying, "all that matters is if you are born again," suggesting at the same time that membership rolls are a man-made invention.

Even in churches that aspire to a Biblical practice of church membership, errant tendencies can creep in. In Hebrews the Christians were not faithfully going to church, and were ignoring their church officers. In Jude a number of people were posing as Christians, but were really godless unbelievers. James warns against treating certain church members with partiality. In Galatians the Apostle Peter fell into sin of showing preference to the Jews over the Gentiles. The Corinthians turned membership into a field of

competition.

The Bible teaches that the invisible church (the elect) manifests herself as a visible body of people, distributed among organized congregations with elders, constituted of identifiable members endowed with spiritual gifts to edify one another. In the NT, when people are removed from an organized congregation it is an act of church discipline called excommunication (1 Cor. 5:13). When people remove themselves it is an act of rebellion called apostasy (1 Jn. 2:19). Exceptions arise where converts have no local church to join. The Ethiopian eunuch was baptized in the desert (Acts 8:38). Yet, ordinarily when circumstances permit, believers unite with a church.

As the apostles planted churches they established a congregation and a government in each place. (Acts 20:17; Titus 1:5). These governments had jurisdiction over the members of their congregations (Heb. 13:17). The apostles were building an organized religion.

In one word, church membership establishes jurisdiction. 1 Pet. 5:2-3 says to church elders, "shepherd the flock of God among you exercising oversight... [not] as lording it over those allotted to your charge...." To be allotted to the charge of elders means to be subject to the jurisdiction of elders. This is what membership defines. To avoid church membership is to keep oneself above and beyond the jurisdiction of those who enforce the law of the church.

Those who were subject to the churches' government were called "insiders." Others were called "outsiders." Col. 4:5 says, "Conduct yourselves with wisdom towards outsiders." 1 Cor. 5:12-13 reads, "For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? But those who are outside, God judges." 1 Tim. 3:7 says that an overseer of the church "must have a good reputation with those outside." These terms distinguish between those who were, and were not part of the organized churches to whom the various NT letters were written.

Insiders are subject to excommunication, but outsiders are not. This is why Paul says, "For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church" (1 Cor. 5:12)? To excommunicate someone is to identify that person as an outsider.

The very practice of excommunication assumes the practice of identifying members. And the obligation to excommunicate people who stubbornly live in sin assumes the obligation to establish membership rolls in the church of those who forsake their sin.

The Bible also talks about improper excommunication. 3 Jn. 10 mentions an elder who was illegitimately expelling members. John writes that Diotrephes wrongly "puts out of the church" members with whom he disagrees. You can't put someone out unless they have first been put into the church.

Not only that, 2 Cor. 2:8 prescribes the restoration of the excommunicated person in 1 Cor. 5. This is a specific example of one person being given the privilege of membership in the local church. Paul was requiring the church's elders to place this individual on the church roll from which he was previously removed.

Those who are not members of the church are in a dangerous place. Paul calls being excommunicated, "handed over to Satan" (1 Tim. 1:20), and "delivered to Satan for... destruction" (1 Cor. 5:5). People who are removed from the accountability and jurisdiction of the church's government are left to their sin which will likely consume them.

The principle of church membership is also exemplified in the church's right to diaconal aid. The church's government is responsible to provide for their needy members who qualify for help (Acts 6). Moreover, the church had lists of members who received this aid (1 Tim. 5:9, 11), illustrating the church's practice of keeping lists of members in accordance with their needs and duties.

In 1 Cor. 12:12ff Paul describes the universal invisible church as a single "body" composed of "members," (eyes, ears, hands, etc.). Then Paul applies this universal principle to the local visible church in Corinth, requiring them to manifest this universal reality in their local assembly. They are to act like a single "body" with a diverse variety of

unified “members.” There is a unity to the body that should express itself in the Corinthian “assembly” (14:23, 26), such that “each one is given a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

Most people who avoid church membership say they are a part of the invisible church, and nothing else matters. But the Bible does not speak highly about people who say they are something on the inside without manifesting the reality on the outside. The invisible church manifests itself outwardly in organized local assemblies. It is hypocritical to identify with one apart from the other if the opportunity is available.

Another metaphor used to describe the church is that of a family (1 Tim. 5:1). The church relates to one another like a family with sons and daughters, sisters and brothers, mothers and fathers. Inherent in this metaphor is the notion of loyal membership.

Where does the Bible explicitly require Christians to establish church membership? Two passages are worth considering. Heb. 13:17 says, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.” Secondly, Eph. 5:21 says, be subject to one another in the fear of Christ.” These two passages define the essence of church membership which is expressed in your

accountability to the elders and to your fellow members.

-Pastor Ferry