



## **Biblical Foundation for Church Membership**

Restoration Church believes the divinely inspired Scriptures have supreme authority in all matters of faith and practice. Therefore, the only appropriate starting place in investigating church membership is by asking the question, “Does church membership find its roots in the Bible?”<sup>1</sup>

### God has Always Had an Identifiable Covenant People

First, we see in the Scriptures God has always had an identifiable people. So we see in Genesis 1-2 the identifiable people of God are Adam and Eve in the garden. In Genesis 6 we see the identifiable people of God are those on the ark with Noah. In Genesis 12 and following we see the identifiable people of God are those in the lineage of Abraham who have been circumcised (cf. Gn. 17). In Exodus and Leviticus God's identifiable people are those with the law (Ex. 19:5-6). In Joshua God's identifiable people are those given the land (Josh. 21:43).

Then you see in the New Testament Jesus comes to save his people (Mt. 1:21). This people is an identifiable people because they repent, believe, and are baptized into the local church (Mk. 1:15; Acts 2:28). Jesus says he will build his church and it will be a public, earthly institution that identifies, affirms, and oversees those who profess to believe in him (Mt. 16:18; 18:15-20). Throughout the NT we see exactly that - the church expanding as a people. It's important to realize the church is a people and not just a group of persons. And what makes them a people is a covenant, or as we say it, covenant membership. Without membership it's just a group of persons, but Christ came to save his people.

### Obedience Demands Local Church Membership

The New Testament contains fifty-plus “one another” commands (i.e. Jn. 13:34-35; Col. 3:13; Heb. 10:24-25). Apart from an identifiable local church membership, followers of Christ are left without definition as to who constitutes “one another,” and therefore could not follow these commands. Thus, obedience to the “one another” commands is impossible apart from being a member in a local church.

Additionally, the absence of formal local church membership renders restorative church discipline unfeasible. In Matthew 18:15-17 Jesus outlines the process for restorative church discipline. He says if a “brother sins against you” and he “refuses to listen” to private confrontation, the sin is brought “to the church.” The ‘church’ referenced here cannot mean the universal church – that is, all believers - for that would be an impossible directive to follow. Jesus, therefore, must be referring to the local church. Unless there is a dividing line – some way of knowing who is part of the local church and who is not – Christ’s command poses an unachievable standard. Local church membership is that dividing line.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, the writer of Hebrews assumes local church membership; otherwise some of the commandments therein are unintelligible. Hebrews 13:17 charges Christians to “Obey your leaders and submit to them.” A particular Christian can only abide by this command if he or she is under the leadership of a particular group of elders. On the other side of the equation, elders are told they are responsible for those particular Christians under their guidance (Acts 20:28; Hebrews 13:7; 1 Peter 3:5). Given the weighty and eternally significant dynamic between particular elders and particular parishioners, local church membership must exist.

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<sup>1</sup> While the exact words ‘church membership’ do not appear in the Bible, nor is there a direct command demanding such, formalized church membership is assumed through the entirety of Scripture. And as this document shows, this unwavering assumption presents a clear case for the necessity of local churches carefully practicing church membership.

<sup>2</sup> In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul details the outworkings of restorative church discipline. He instructs that the unrepentant man must be “removed from among you.” In order for this man to be formally excluded, he must have been formally included – that is, an official church member.

If there is no formal relationship between people within a particular church and no formal relationship between particular church members and particular pastors, dozens of New Testament commands become incoherent. Therefore, formal church membership resonates with the teaching of the Scriptures.

### Images Communicate Local Church Membership

The various images for the church in the New Testament also testify to the existence of a literal, visible membership. This wide range of vivid images includes, the body of Christ (Col. 1:18), branches on a vine (Jn. 15:5), an olive tree (Rom. 11:17-24), a flock of sheep (Jn. 10:1-18; Acts 20:28), a building or temple (Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Pet. 2:4-8), and a field of crops (1 Cor. 3:6-9).

Each of these images demands more than an informal, casual commitment. Body parts are precisely joined together, not informally connected. Branches do not casually attach to a vine – they are necessarily connected to the vine. Stones in a building are carefully and purposefully positioned together, not inconspicuously placed against one another. In accordance with these images, local churches are composed of individuals connected to each other through formal church membership.

### A Specific Type of Membership

The New Testament not only assumes membership, it assumes a specific type. The proper candidates for joining a local church are only those individuals who have repented of their sins and placed faith in Jesus Christ alone as their substitutionary payment for their sin. At least three biblical factors support the notion of restricting church membership to this group of people.<sup>3</sup>

First, all the New Testament letters are specifically addressed to followers of Christ. When reading the letters of Paul it seems clear that he wrote to local churches as if they were composed solely of believers – that is, people who have faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ (1&2 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:2; 1&2 Thess. 1:1). Clearly, Paul knew only of churches composed of individuals who see Jesus as both Lord and Savior.

Second, the New Testament teachings on church discipline seem to anticipate the possibility of inadvertently allowing false members to join. 1 Corinthians 5 teaches that “anyone who bears the name brother” but lives an unrepentant, contradictory lifestyle must be purged from the fellowship. Jesus makes the same type of statement in Matthew 18. The New Testament contains these commands to preserve the purity of the membership of a local church.

Third, the images used to depict the local church necessitate a certain type of member. The church is described as the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit. Great difficulty arises in seeing how the church could simultaneously be described as the body of Christ and temple of the Holy Spirit if some of the members have no connection to either Christ or the Spirit.

### Summary

Both the direct commands and vivid images Scripture build a compelling case that show formal church membership is a foundational characteristic of the church. In order for Christians to adhere to “one another” commands and submit to their leaders, formal membership is required. Likewise, official church membership provides the only fitting scenario for which elders can reasonably be held accountable for those souls entrusted to their care. Further, the images used to depict the church are coherent only if formal church membership exists. Finally, the overwhelming description of every church as consisting only of believers further bolsters the case for membership being restricted to those who have repented of sin and placed their faith in Christ. Simply put, churches desirous of being

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<sup>3</sup> Biblically this is called the doctrine of Regeneration. When God regenerates a person – they go from being dead in sin to alive in Christ, and the fruit of that regeneration is repentance of sin and faith in Christ. So a healthy church practices ‘regenerate church membership’ – that is, it only allows those who have repented of their sin and place their faith in Christ to join their fellowship.

biblically faithful must strive for formal membership composed of individuals who believe in and follow Jesus as both Lord and Savior.

### Benefits of Church Membership

**Personal – Join for Yourself:** There are two personal benefits of joining a church: affirmation and accountability. Meaningful membership affirms your salvation. The membership in and of itself does nothing to save you, but it does provide a public affirmation of your right standing before God. When you join a church you have an entire group of people affirming your salvation, encouraging you and keeping you accountable in your walk with Christ.

**Mutual – Join for Others:** This is the flip side of the personal reason. We have the opportunity to encourage those around us – whether it's a new Christians we can disciple or a mature Christian going through a tough time, the church is a body designed to be mutually dependent upon one another. Essentially when you join a church you are saying "I am now your responsibility and you are mine."

We should also join a church for those who are not Christians. When a unified church body gathers to encourage and exhort one another the gospel becomes visible to the watching world. Join a church for the sake of those who have not yet repented of their sin and placed their faith in Christ that they may see the gospel at work.

**Doxological – Join for God:** And this brings us to the final reason we should join the church – a doxological reason. Join a church because it brings glory to God. When the church is a city within the city displaying the character of God, he rightly gets the glory he deserves. As Ephesians 3:10 says, it is "through the church the manifold wisdom of God is made known."