

MEANINGFUL MEMBERSHIP – An Introduction

“In our present day, we live in between the inauguration of Christ’s kingdom and its consummation. Because the powers of darkness continue to work, it is not yet apparent to our eyes who belongs to the people of God and who does not. Yet ***the practice of church membership helps to make that distinction clearer***. When a local church accepts a believer into membership by virtue of his baptism and profession of faith, the church proclaims to the world, “This person gives evidence of being a Christian. Consider him a part of God’s people.” When an individual Christian joins a church, he proclaims to the world, “This body of believers is the body of Christ, the people of God.”

The people of God are not called the people of God for their own sake. They exist as the people of God to please and glorify God. Christ calls the church to be salt and light in a dark and decaying world (Matt 5:13). He tells Christians not to conform to the evil desires they had when they were not God’s people, but to be holy as God is holy (1 Pet. 1:14-16). And he has saved the church so that it might display the eternal glory and wisdom of God to the universe (Eph. 3:10). As such, a clear line of membership helps to make these goals a reality in the life of the church. It marks out these people as a display of his mercy and kindness to the surrounding world—all to his glory.

Throughout Scripture, we see a pattern of God making his people visibly distinct from the world. When the local church practices meaningful church membership, it simply participates in what God has been doing all along.

One day, the Lamb’s book of life will be the only membership roll, and the reading of that roll will be dreadful and awesome. Until that day, churches, by keeping lists, show love for those on the inside and those on the outside (cf. 1 Cor. 5:12-13). However imperfect these earthly lists might be, they prepare everyone for the final reading of the list that bears no mistakes.”

- Mike McKinley, Pastor of Sterling Park Baptist Church, Sterling, VA

Basic Ecclesiology

WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

The church is the body of people called by God’s grace through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ and incorporated into his body through baptism with the Holy Spirit to glorify him together by serving him in this world.

New Hampshire Confession of Faith:

We believe that a visible church of Christ is a congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the ordinances of Christ; governed by his laws; and exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by his word ...

Local churches ...

- are led by pastors (also called elders) and served by deacons,
- possess and pursue purity and unity,
- exercise church discipline,
- develop strong connections with other churches, and
- celebrate the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

The church arises only from the gospel. And a distorted church usually coincides with a distorted gospel. Whether it leads to such distortions or results from them, serious departure from the Bible's teaching about the church normally signify other, more central misunderstandings about the Christian faith.

- Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love*, 17-19

WHAT IS THE **GOSPEL**?

The Gospel is the _____ that the just and gracious Creator of the universe has looked upon hopelessly sinful men and women and has sent his Son, Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, to bear his wrath against sin on the cross and to show his power over sin in the resurrection, so that everyone who turns from their sin and themselves and trusts in Jesus as Savior and Lord will be reconciled to God forever.

WHAT IS THE **MISSION** OF THE CHURCH?

Equipped by the Holy Spirit with spiritual gifts for ministry, these communities regularly gather to ...

- _____ the triune God,
- _____ his Word,
- engage non-Christians with _____,
- _____ their members,
- _____ for people through prayer and service, and
- stand both for and against _____.

Matthew 28:18-20 (ESV)

¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and **make disciples of all nations**, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

WHAT IS A **DISCIPLE**?

A **disciple** is someone who responds to the *call* to follow Christ, is taking on the *character* of Christ, and obeys the *commission* of Christ. (Matthew 4:19)

2 Corinthians 5:17 (ESV)

¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

2 Corinthians 3:16-18 (ESV)

¹⁶ But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. ¹⁷ Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸ And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

2 Peter 1:3-4 (ESV)

³ His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, ⁴ by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.

Romans 6:3-4 (ESV)

³ Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

WHO IS THE CHURCH?

The answer is fairly simple: The church is made up of its members. And just as the Bible defines what a church is, what a church should believe, and what a church should do, it defines who its members are:

Church membership is an idea with deep biblical roots:

1. _____ had an inside and an outside (Gen. 2:8, 3:24).
2. _____ had an inside and an outside (Gen. 7:16).
3. The people of God _____ had to be ceremonially clean to remain inside the camp and not to be cast outside (Lev. 13:46, Num. 5:3).
4. _____ was to have an inside and an outside, as represented by food laws, festivals, political boundaries, places of worship, and even strong provisions against inter-marriage (Lev. 11, Lev. 23, Josh. 14-21, 1 Kings 8, Deut. 7:3).
5. In the New Testament, the ethnic and cultural boundary markers of the Old Testament are exploded. But a clear, bright line remains between those who are God's people and those who are not, as indicated by their _____ and the visible _____ of their lives, as well as by the practices of _____ and _____ (Rom. 6:3-4, 1 Cor. 11:17-34, Gal. 3:27). Baptism and the Lord's Supper are what give substance and shape to a church's membership. There is an *inside* (those who have been baptized and are welcomed to the Lord's table) and an *outside* (those who are not).
6. In Matthew 18:15-20, Jesus taught that if people do not _____ they must be excluded from the local church. And he called the church to do this.
7. In 1 Corinthians 5:12-13 Paul challenges the Corinthian church to judge those who are _____ the church and leave judging _____ to God. How did the Corinthians know who was in and who was out? They knew whom Paul was talking about because some people had formally, publicly identified themselves with the church in Corinth while the rest of the city had not. Those who had were inside the church. They were the church's members. Those who hadn't were not.
8. In 2 Corinthians 2:6, Paul referred to a punishment inflicted on a straying member by " _____ ". He is not writing to the elders, but to the membership as a whole.

"Churches which practice no formal membership and discipline at least make it more difficult for the believers who are part of it to follow Christ and more difficult for those elders to know for whom they are to give an account (Heb. 13:17). In fact, I would go a step farther and say that churches which practice no self-conscious membership are in sin since Christians cannot follow basic biblical commands without it. According to the New Testament, church leaders need to know who is and who is not a member of the congregation. And perhaps even more important, Christians need to know this – for their own souls' sake!"

- Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible*

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