

Our country's constitution promises, "*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion...*" No American, natural born or naturalized, wants to be coerced by the government into believing a particular religion and forced to join an institution. America bases religious freedom on the individual's conscience. However, the elevation of the autonomous individual conscience comes with adverse side effects that manifest eventually, such as the onset of commitment phobia for an entire generation of modern Americans.

Some Christians view organized church and formal church membership as violating individual consciences. *Are church authority and formal membership uncharitable, elitist, and even unchristian? Are other people's commitments any of our business? Doesn't formal organization suffocate church vitality?*

This morning, we will consider whether formally organized church membership is Biblical. And, if Biblical, we will investigate its nature, meaning, and purpose. *I will argue that formal church membership is Biblical and Expected for Christians. A Democratic Congress may not establish a religious institution for Americans. But King Jesus has established the church for his people, and valuing membership is crucial to our discipleship. To explore this topic, we will ask two questions, 'What is a church?' and 'What is a church member?'*

I. What is a Church?

To understand the church, we must understand the covenant that created the church. God constructed Old Covenant Israel upon natural descent and national citizenship. But he builds his New Covenant church is built on individual conversions.

So, let me begin by asking, how are people saved? God regenerates individuals. Ezekiel 36:26 "*And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you.*" Through his Spirit, God regenerates individuals, in a personal way, by giving them new hearts. The

determinative connection between God and humans is not family lineage but faith in Christ. Paul wrote, “*Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it*” (1 Cor. 12:27). Jesus builds his church upon persons who believe and confess the truth and live confidently and faithfully according to it.

However, a complication arises when we over-emphasize the personal & individual aspects of the New Covenant at the expense of its corporate features. Consider Ezekiel 37:24 and 27, which says, “*My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall walk in my rules and be careful to obey my statutes... 27 My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*” **God promises to be God to a people, not merely to numerous, loosely connected, siloed individuals.** God saves and unites a people under one king and gives them social unity with a shared ethical framework.

God constituted the Old Covenant nation of Israel as his people through blood sacrifice. They became more than just a nation. They became God’s people through a covenant. **When Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper, he foreshadowed that his blood would create a church out of the forgiven people of God. His death saves sinners and makes a New Covenant people. In other words, the New Covenant is personal and corporate. To be in covenant with Jesus is to be in covenant with his people. The Christian life is church life!**

So, I ask again, what is a church? The more you understand the nature of the church, the more you will understand church membership. There are two primary ways to describe Christ’s church: universal and local. The universal church is composed of all true Christians, everywhere in heaven and on earth, throughout all history. **You become a member of the universal church when you become a Christian.** Paul says, God “*raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus*” (Eph. 2:6). The author of Hebrews highlights the

heavenly existence of this universal church: “*You have come to—the heavenly Jerusalem—to the assembly [ekklesia, or church] of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven*” (Heb. 12:22).

The second and far more extensive way to describe the church is local. Again, a local church has two primary facets: organic and institutional. The most popular is the organic description: loving one another, shepherding, encouraging, exercising gifts, etc. Organic descriptions illustrate the life and vitality of the local church. *Think of this aspect like your body’s flesh and its vital organs: its skin, eyes, circulatory system, heart, lungs, etc.*

The second way is to describe the local church institutionally. That is, to talk about the governing structures of a church. People find this aspect less pleasant to consider and discuss. *Think of the institutional reality of the local church as the skeleton of the body. Admittedly, skeletons without flesh are dead! However, the flesh cannot grow and survive without bones. The skeleton gives shape, strength, and vitality to the flesh and the body’s vital organs.* So, it is with the institutional nature of the church. The formal governing structures of a local church support and energize the church’s organic activities. *When we devalue the institutional nature of the church, we misunderstand and misapply church membership.* So, let’s explore the church as an institution.

We first discover that Jesus established the Church.¹ Jesus says in Matthew 16:18-19, *And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.*”

This passage is the first of only two times that *Jesus* uses the word ‘church,’ and here, unlike in

¹ Leeman, *Church Membership*, Chapter 3

Matthew 18, he refers to the universal. **How will he build it?** Jesus will build his church on the rock, both Peter and his confession. **He will build his church on believing Peter, who proclaims the true faith, and on people who likewise confess the true faith.**

The dynamic interaction must be noted: Peter confesses the truth about Jesus. Jesus affirmed his answer was from heaven. **Then, Jesus authorized him to represent what's bound and loosed in heaven. Jesus gives the apostles the keys of the kingdom to act as heaven's official representatives.** They exercise the keys by imitating Jesus and considering people's confessions. **The apostles are to do what Jesus just did with Peter! Jesus establishes an official institutional church: the apostles officially represent heaven and declare who else represents heaven through evaluating confessions and confessors.**

Jesus anticipated the apostles passing on that responsibility to local churches. Local churches are to officially recognize faithful confessors and dismiss imposters. Two chapters later, Jesus uses the word church for the second and last time. The actions described require this to happen visibly and locally. In this chapter, we see the keys in action in the hands of a gathered local church. Jesus says in Matthew 18:17-20,

If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.

There are roughly four procedural stages of procedure seek and restore a sinning brother and purge the evil from the church. The third stage is to bring him before the entire church. Finally, if the sinning person does not repent, the church removes the offender from the covenant community, also known as excommunication.

Jesus refers to the keys of the kingdom again but not concerning apostles or pastors. Instead, he envisions the assembly of the local church wielding the keys. **Jesus moved us from the apostles' authority over the universal church to congregational authority in local churches.** Here, *the local church* has the authority to assess the confessor and the confession and make an official judgment on heaven's behalf. They are to pray and seek wisdom, and the Father will help the church represent heaven in a decision.

Jesus himself authorizes the church to officially and publicly recognize confessors!

The church exercises the keys through the ordinances: Baptism, commissioned in Matthew 28, and the Lord's Supper in Matthew 26. These ordinances are church ordinances. They are public and formal and not primarily individual and mystical experiences. Affirming one's testimony with baptism is how the church admits into membership. The Lord's Supper represents the church's ongoing affirmation of the participant's communion with Christ and his people. This is why, when the church excommunicates someone through the process Jesus outlined in Matthew 18, they are barred from taking communion. They are out of communion with Christ and, therefore, out of communion with his church.

1 Corinthians 5 shows a real-life example of the keys. Paul tells the Corinthian church to remove a man for the destruction of his flesh and the hopeful salvation of his soul. Then he says in verses 11-12, *"But 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. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?"* You can't take someone 'out' if they were never 'in.' The Bible clearly indicates that the church knew who was in the church and who was out. Therefore, **Paul reserves church discipline only for those formally inside the church.** Church

discipline won't work if local formal membership doesn't exist. The very nature and function of the local church require it.

Later in 2 Corinthians 2, we learn about the repentance of a formerly excommunicated sinner. The church again exercises the keys by affirming his repentance and returning him to the church. In verses 6-8, Paul writes, *“For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.”*

Jesus established the institution of the Church, under his headship through his Word, as the highest authority for Christians on earth.² Local churches officially recognize true faith and dismiss imposters. We can look for membership sightings all over the New Testament. But the most crucial place to look is the nature of the local church. For a church to obey Christ, it must have formal membership!

Now, local churches will not exercise keys perfectly. However, Jesus promises his presence and the aid of heaven to a wisdom-seeking, praying community. But rare mistakes do not diminish their authority any more than parents' mistakes diminish their authority. More so, the church cannot change the status of someone in heaven. We declare evidence of heaven's judgment. As Jonathon Leeman says, the church is more like the authority of an embassy, not the mainland. The embassy in a foreign land cannot make someone a citizen and revoke citizenship by its own power. By renewing passports, it can only formally recognize and affirm what the home country has already declared. So likewise, the local church can only recognize what heaven has already declared.

² Leeman, *Church Membership*, 62.

Finally, we have arrived at a place where we can define a local church. Here is an edited version of ecclesialogist Jonathan Leeman's definition: **A covenant community of local Christians who regularly gather in Christ's name with the power of the keys to affirm the gospel and one another's kingdom citizenship in the gospel through the ordinances.** God marks a line between his people and the world through the church. **Formal, official, and public church membership is entirely Biblical and expected if this is the case. The church cannot fulfill its function without formal membership. Consequently, a Christian is outside the King's design for his people and their life without an official relationship with a local church.**

Why does a good membership practice make a healthy church? Because the church fulfills Jesus' mandate to be his official representative on earth. **This membership process enables the church to guard the true gospel, publicize true confessions, and protect its members. All this guards the reputation of Jesus himself and glorifies him among the nations.**

II. What is Membership?

How does the Bible's description of a church define membership for us? Again, let me share an edited version of Jonathan Leeman's excellent definition: **a Formal relationship between a church and a Christian where the church publicly affirms a person as belonging to Christ and the church, and the Christian commits and submits to living out their discipleship under the care of the church. If Jesus makes the church responsible for officially recognizing confessions and dismissing false confessors, then he expects Christians to initiate and formalize a relationship with the church.**

Consider Acts 2:41: *"So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls."* First, the church officially recognizes your profession of

faith and baptism. Then, it covenants to care for your spiritual well-being. **The individual formally commits *to serve* that church and *submit* to its oversight.** The church takes responsibility for the spiritual health of the individual, and, in turn, they take responsibility for the spiritual health of the church. **It is much like the covenant of marriage (with limitations: leaving for another church is not exactly like a divorce).** The formal marriage covenant leads to **the beautiful reality of two becoming one.** Likewise, membership leads to a wonderfully more profound covenantal love and discipleship.

If this is what church membership is, then there are at least three other reasons Pastor Mark Dever gives you to join a church.

III. Why Join a church?

First, join to assure yourself and others. Joining a church will not save you any more than any other good work will save you. Membership simply reflects your salvation. Joining a church is a testimony of your membership to the universal church. Covenant membership with one another here reflects your membership in the new covenant in the kingdom of heaven. **Likewise, submitting to the limited and delegated authority of the local church on earth is an act of submitting to the unlimited authority of King Jesus in heaven.**

Mark Dever writes, ‘Church membership is putting ourselves in a position where we ask brothers and sisters to hold us accountable for our profession and living accordingly.’ It also formally acknowledges their authority to do so (Mat. 18). **Imagine telling our police force they have the *responsibility* to protect and serve by enforcing the law but then refusing to give them the official authority and support they need for that role. The State fails to recognize them, pay them, and protect them. It won’t work. Without covenanting in membership, one gives other**

Christians the responsibility to serve and protect them but no authority to do so. You may not think you need this level of protection, but heed Hebrews 3:12, which warns, *“Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.”* Membership is joining hands and encouraging one another on the road to glory.

Second, join a church because it is how you officially represent Jesus! The church authorizes your representation of Jesus. As Leeman says, consider membership as a passport while visiting a foreign country. The passport does not make you a citizen, but it does officially declare it to the foreign nation. We are aliens and strangers in this world, and our baptism and church membership is our official declaration to the world that we represent Jesus.³

Jesus commissioned the church to make disciples of all nations. He commanded us to go, baptize, and teach. Only gathered members of churches can formally affirm someone’s testimony, baptism, and entry into the church. Only members can engage in formal discipline. Join a church and help make the gospel visible to the world. Membership gives you ownership over the work of the church.

Third, Join a church to edify the church and love the pastors. The essence of membership is committed love. Hebrews 10:24-25 says, *“And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”* Church membership is a promise

³ Jesus says Matthew 10:32, *“So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven.”* Some fear public speaking and thus do not proceed to membership. Brothers and sisters, confessing Christ in front of the church will be the easiest place in the world to confess Christ before men.

that you will not neglect to meet with us. Therefore, church membership is a commitment to love and a promise to back it up.

Later, Hebrews 13:17 says, *“Obey 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.”*⁴ If you are a regular attender and have identified a church to attend regularly, love those pastors by joining. The confusion created over your not joining brings no joy to a pastor.

So, does Jesus expect you to join a church formally? Yes. But let me be clear. When people think of membership, they think of lists, databases, classes, constitutions, public speaking, etc. I am only arguing that the principle of an acknowledged, formal relationship between a church and an individual is Biblical. The only clear Biblical thing about the “process of membership” is baptism. Here at our church, we have classes, documents to agree with, pastoral interviews, baptism if needed, public testimony, a month for deliberation, then a formal church vote. These are forms. **Forms can change, but the principle of mutual acknowledgment is fundamental.** Please understand that we are in Mebane, North Carolina, USA, in the 21st century. These are matters of wisdom.

Membership is a mutually recognized formal relationship established by Jesus, himself. It is the commitment of a church to a believer and a believer to a church. Members, be encouraged by your responsibilities and lovingly engage those not yet members. If you are not a member somewhere, I hope this will enable you to see the church with a fresh vision.

⁴ If there is no biblical requirement to belong a local church, then which leaders should an individual Christian obey and submit to? Second, who will pastors give an account for?