

Most modern Americans suffer from commitment phobia. Tragically, many modern, Western Christians also have that phobia and even view organized church and formal church membership as violating individual consciences. *Are other people's commitments any of our business?*

This morning, *I will argue that formal church membership is Biblical and Expected for Christians. Of course, 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 three questions, 'What is a church?,' 'What is a church member?,' and why join a church?*

I. What is a Church?

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

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 (corporate) and individually members (personal) 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 37:27, which says, *"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 constituted the Old Covenant nation of Israel as his people through blood sacrifice. When Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper, he foreshadowed that his blood would create a church from his death. 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!

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. 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. 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 survive and grow without bones. The skeleton gives shape and strength to the flesh and shields the body’s vital organs. The formal governing structures of a local church support, strengthen,

and protect the church's organic activities. *When we devalue the institutional nature of the church, we misunderstand and misapply church membership.*

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 Hades 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.”¹

This passage is the first of only two verses that *Jesus* uses the word ‘church,’ and here, unlike in Matthew 18, he refers to the universal. *How will he build it? Jesus will build his church on people who 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.* They exercise the keys by imitating Jesus and considering people's confessions. *Jesus created the formal governing structures of the Church and introduced the mechanism (keys) for identifying those who belong to it and distinguishing them from those who don't. Jesus establishes the groundwork of an official institutional church (seed form in Matthew 16, fuller form in Matthew 18/NT).*

Jesus anticipated the apostles passing on that responsibility to local churches. Two chapters later, Jesus uses the word church for the second and last time in Matthew's' gospel. In Matthew 18:17-20, we see the keys in action in the hands of a gathered local church.

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.

¹ Leeman, *Church Membership*, Chapter 3

The third stage of discipline requires bringing the offender before the entire church. If the sinning person does not repent, the church removes the offender from the covenant community, also known as excommunication.

Jesus 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.*

Jesus authorizes the church to officially and publicly recognize confessors and dismiss imposters! Affirming one's testimony with public baptism is how the church admits one into membership. The Lord's Supper represents the church's ongoing affirmation of the participant's communion with Christ and his people. When the church excommunicates, they bar 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 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' of the church if they were never formally 'in' it. The Bible clearly indicates that the church knew who was in the church and who was out. **Church discipline won't work if local formal membership doesn't exist.** **The very nature** (New Covenant people) **and function** (identify believers and remove imposters) **of the local church requires membership.**

Later in 2 Corinthians 2, we learn about the repentance of a formerly excommunicated sinner. 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.*” The church again exercises the keys by affirming his repentance and restoring him to the church.

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

Now, local churches will not exercise keys perfectly. But rare mistakes do not diminish their authority any more than parents’ mistakes diminish their authority. As Jonathan Leeman says, the church is more like the authority of an embassy. The embassy in a foreign land cannot make someone a citizen or revoke citizenship by its own power. Instead, 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 and cannot change someone’s spiritual status.

Finally, here is an edited version of Jonathan Leeman’s definition of a local church: **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 through the ordinances.** God marks a line between his people and the world through the church. The church

² Leeman, *Church Membership*, 62.

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. Membership enables the church to guard the true gospel, publicize true confessions, and protect its members. All this guards Jesus' reputation and glorifies him among the nations.

II. What is Membership?

Again, let me share an edited version of Jonathan Leeman's excellent definition: **Church Membership is 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 publicly representing him, then he expects Christians to initiate and formalize a relationship with the church as a matter of obedience.**

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. So likewise, membership leads to a wonderfully more profound covenantal love and discipleship.

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 and testifies to

your membership in the universal church. Likewise, submitting to the limited 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.’ Imagine the State making our police force responsible for enforcing the law but refusing to give them the official authority and support they need. It won’t work. Without covenanting in membership, a person makes the church responsible for serving and protecting them but refuses to recognize their authority.

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.”

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 officially declares your American citizenship to a foreign nation. We are aliens and strangers in this world, and our baptism and church membership are 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.

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.

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 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 and submit to those pastors by joining.

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, 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, pastoral interviews, baptism, public testimony, a month for deliberation, then a formal church vote. Processes can change, but the principle of mutual acknowledgment is fundamental.

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

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?

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.