

Is Church Membership Biblical?

By Erik Meyers (Lead Pastor, Veritas Church)

There is considerable controversy (amongst Christians) over *church membership* today. Many don't see a Biblical precedence for it. The common arguments go like this:

"I'm already a member of Christ's Church, why do I have to join a church." "Where in the Bible does it tell me to join a church?" "The institutional church is corrupt." "I am the Church."

Good luck finding the phrase "join a church" in the Bible. You won't. It's not there. But that doesn't mean that church membership is not a Biblical reality. A good hermeneutical (fancy word for Bible study) approach acknowledges that Biblical realities need not be explicitly stated within the text. For example, the term "trinity" never appears in Scripture, but it has for two millenniums been accepted as a foundational Biblical doctrine.

So for anyone on the fence, I'm going to make a case here for church membership by making two assertions: 1) **the local church is a Biblical reality**, and 2) **membership in the local church is a Biblical reality**.

First, **the local church is a biblical reality**. By local church, I mean an *identifiable* and *organized* local expression of the universal Church. Surely it's *more* than that, but it's at least that.

The universal Church (Greek *ekklesia*) is not an event or venue. The Church is a people; *God's people* who love and trust him (i.e. faith). Specifically, the church is the people who, for and from all time, have been divinely chosen (election by God the Father), reconciled (atonement by Jesus the Son) and loved (effectual grace by God the Spirit) into loving and trusting God (1 John 3:16).

The Church, then, is global (people from all places) and timeless (people from all times). This has historically been called the Universal Church, or the Invisible Church. Therefore, when we call Veritas a "church," we mean a local community that is representative of a global and timeless community – people gathered here in Roseville who have been divinely loved into loving and trusting God.

A local church is a smaller (than the universal church), identifiable body of Christians in a given community. Paul writes to "the church in Corinth" (1 Cor. 1:1), "the churches of Galatia" (Gal. 1:2), and "the church of the Thessalonians" (1 Thess. 1:1). In his letter to Corinth, he even refers to "all the churches" (1 Cor. 14:33). To be sure, Paul is writing to members of the universal church, but more specifically, he is writing to members of local churches. He writes to specific Christians in a specific church regarding specific issues.

As well, these local church were organized:

- These local churches gathered together weekly for formal worship (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 11:18).
- These local churches worshipped on a specific day (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2).
- These local churches had order and structure to their services (1 Cor. 14:26ff).
- Each local church had identified leaders, called elders (synonymous with shepherds, overseers, and pastors) (1 Tim. 3:1; Acts 14:23).
- Local church appointed deacons to serve the elders and free them up for prayer and preaching (Acts 6:3-4; Philippians 1:1).
- Organized collections were taken in local churches and money was used to support ministry as well as those enduring financial hardship (1 Cor. 16:2; 1 Tim. 5:17-18).
- The local church administered the sacrament of communion regularly and formally (1 Cor. 11:33-34).

Second, **membership in the local church is a biblical reality**. By membership, I mean a numbered, identifiable group of people committed to Christ and one another. This is distinct from the universal church.

If it is clear from Scripture that the local church is a reality, than who constitutes these local churches? Our word is members. Perhaps there is another word we could use, but that is the word we choose for this Biblical reality; Namely, these local churches were comprised of a numbered, identifiable, committed group of Christians who were in commitment to Christ and one another.

I submit the following texts about the church and would ask how they would carry any significance apart from the local church being comprised of committed members.

The church is called to discipline its members.

If church membership does not exist, then who is responsible for exhorting a believer in sin and ultimately rendering a judgment about their standing within the community ("let him be to you as...)? Would this be the responsibility of anyone who walks in off the street and says "I'm a Christian?"

Matthew 18:15-17

"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. **16**But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. **17**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.

The church may excommunicate a member.

If church membership does not exist, how is someone kicked out of a church?

1 Corinthians 5:12-13

For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those *inside the church* whom you are to judge? **13**God judges those outside. "*Purge the evil person from among you.*"

Christians are required to submit to their leaders.

If church membership does not exist, than who are these leaders Christians are to submit to? Is it all leaders of all churches? And who are leaders to lead? Are leaders to lead all Christians in a city? Are they called to administer church discipline over individuals who participate in another church?

I would submit that some sort of an agreement, covenant, or commitment (i.e. membership) precedes a person's submission to leaders. And how is this biblical portrait of leadership and submission going to work if there is no membership defining who is committed to leading and who is committed to being led?

1 Timothy 5:17

Let the *elders who rule well* be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.

Hebrews 13:7, 17

Remember *your leaders*, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.

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.

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13

We ask you, brothers, to respect those who *labor among you* and are *over you* in the Lord and admonish you, **13**and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.

Pastors are required to care for their flock.

Does Scripture teach that all pastors are charged to care for the entire flock of God – the universal church? Or does Scripture teach that pastors are required to care for a specific flock? If membership does not exist, than how is this flock identifiable?

Acts 20:28

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to *all the flock*, in which the Holy Spirit has *made you overseers*, to *care for the church* of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

1 Peter 5:2-3

shepherd the flock of God *that is among you*, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; **3**not domineering over those *in your charge*, but being examples to the flock.

I do not see any believers in the New Testament who are not accountable members of a local church in the way I have pointed out above.

“Lone-Ranger Christians are a contradiction because becoming a Christian means being united to Christ, and union with Christ expresses itself in union with a local body of believers.” (John Piper).

It is not honoring to God for a Christian to dismiss the local church and become his own authority and gather around him his own “church” – which will typically unite on some sort of mission or agenda, and not Christ. A Christian who seeks to honor Christ will submit himself/herself to the authority of a local church which sits under the authority of Jesus. If it was good enough for Paul, it’s good enough for us.

To summarize all the above points, I think the New Testament teaching about church government and church discipline would be meaningless if some form of commitment to mutual accountability in a body of believers were not expected. We call that commitment membership.

Recently, I told people in our church to get off the fence and become members. If they didn’t want to become members I encouraged them to leave (to become members somewhere else). I know some took that the wrong way and felt it was harsh and unbiblical. Hopefully, what I’ve written above brings clarity. I believe church membership is the commitment believers are required to make to a local church, where they can grow with one another, while in submission to leaders appointed by Christ. So my encouragement is for all believers to find a place where they can make this sort of a commitment. If it’s not Veritas, they should go find leaders they can submit to, and people they can love, and join.