

DOES CHURCH MEMBERSHIP MATTER

The church is a divine institution, and it is the center of God's work in the world today. The Bible clearly emphasizes that the church is God's chosen means of accomplishing His purposes in this age. There are more than 100 references to the church in the New Testament. This shows the emphasis that the Holy Spirit has put upon the church, and the vast majority of those references are unquestionably to the local assembly.

Most of the New Testament was written directly to churches. Even those portions not written directly to a church refer to the church. The theme of **Acts** is the planting and multiplication of the first churches. The Pastoral Epistles (**1** and **2 Timothy** and **Titus**) were written to instruct church planters in their work.

Even the general epistles, which are not written to particular churches, always have the churches in mind. **Hebrews** refers to the church in chapters **10** and **13**. **Hebrews 10:25** exhorts God's people not to forsake the assembling of themselves together. In **Hebrews 13:7,17** Christians are exhorted to obey church rulers.

The last chapter of **James** refers to the church. Those who are sick are to call for the "*elders of the church.*"

The final chapter of **1 Peter** also refers to the church, in exhorting elders in their duties.

John refers to the church in his third epistle, when he mentions the proud Diotrephes.

The book of **Revelation**, of course, is written to the seven churches of Asia.

A New Testament church is a body of baptized believers who are congregated together under the oversight of a qualified and ordained pastor and following the pattern of government and accomplishing the work described in the church epistles.

Although the words "church membership" does not appear in the Bible, it is impossible to fulfill the Scriptures without some form of a relationship with a group of other believers.

C. Biblical membership ... ACCEPTANCE OF A SPECIFIC PARTNERSHIP

Partnership with those in the church to accomplish the work of God together.

of salvation as the Bible shows us should then be baptized, following Christ's example and command, and join a Bible-believing and Bible practicing church.

It is clear from Scripture that it is God's will that every believer be a faithful and fruitful member of a sound New Testament church.

EVERY BELIEVER OUGHT TO BE A CHURCH MEMBER FOR IDENTIFICATION - DOCTRINE

EVERY BELIEVER OUGHT TO BE A CHURCH MEMBER FOR INSTRUCTION - DIET

EVERY BELIEVER OUGHT TO BE A CHURCH MEMBER FOR INVOLVMENT - DUTY

- A. Biblical membership ... ASSEMBLY IN A SPECIFIC PLACE
- B. Biblical membership ... ACCOUNTABILITY TO A SPECIFIC PEOPLE

Biblical membership involves and requires some specific LEADERSHIP and MEMBERSHIP to whom you are accountable

There is no Bible instruction about the discipline and watch care of Christians apart from the church. There is no instruction about leadership among Christians apart from the church. There is no instruction about the work of Christians apart from the church. The entire life and work of God's people for this age appears in the context of the local assembly.

Is membership in a local church Biblical? Does the New Testament require, suggest, even hint at local church membership? Are Christians exhorted to belong to a local church, or is it just an option? And what does such belonging entail?

Let me at the outset state that the New Testament knows nothing of a creature reborn through faith in Christ, baptized in identification with Christ, communing with Christ at His table, and not a member of a visible, local, identifiable congregation of other born-again baptized believers.

In the NT, a non-baptized believer is not contemplated. Likewise, a believer who is not a member of a local church is not contemplated as well. New Testament Christians joined a local church.

Although there is no specific verse that says, "Thou shalt join a church," there are many places that either require or teach by example that we should do so.

I. THE FIRST CHURCH HAD A MEMBERSHIP

"And in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples, and said, (the number of names together were about an hundred and twenty,)" (Acts 1:15). This Jerusalem church had a list of about 120 names that made up its membership. Even though the Bible says *"about an hundred and twenty,"* it does not mean that there was any uncertainty. *"About"* is used commonly in scripture to designate a number, in keeping with the usual practice of that day, when people were not trying to be as specific as we are in the twentieth century. For example, **John 1:39** says, *"... it was about the tenth hour."* It was not important in those days to know whether it was 9:55 or 10:05, since they did not have

brethren were called a church in **1 Corinthians 1:2**. Some people were known to belong to the church, some were not.

X. I PETER 4:17 DISTINGUISHED BETWEEN "THE HOUSE OF GOD" AND "THEM THAT OBEY NOT THE GOSPEL."

When we remember that the *"house of God"* is the local church, according to **1 Timothy 3:15**, it becomes obvious that those who had obeyed the gospel were in a church.

Whether or not their names were written on some list is unknown and unimportant; what is obvious is that they knew who was in the church.

The simple truth is that we have no instance of New Testament believers who did not belong to a local church. Joining the church was the normal thing to do, after conversion. The person who has settled the matter

Mathew 18:17 instructs the church to consider an unrepentant brother as a *"heathen man and a publican."*

How would this be done? Certainly not by denying him access to the meetings! We would most assuredly want heathen people to attend our services and hear the preaching of God's Word.

Neither could it mean to stop speaking to the person. Christians should definitely speak to heathen people; how else could we win them to Christ?

But, a church could not permit a heathen to be elected as one of its officers, or preach, or teach, or vote on church matters. Therefore, to say that only certain people are eligible to hold office, etc., is to designate a membership.

IX. I CORINTHIANS 6:1-11 DISTINGUISHES BETWEEN "THE UNJUST . . . THE SAINTS."

Paul spoke of *"a wise man among you (who) shall be able to judge between his brethren"* (5). He rebuked them for going to law before the *"unbelievers"* (6). These

watches, clocks, etc. Likewise, **John 6:19** says, *"... rowed about five and twenty or thirty furlongs."* Similarly, **Acts 5:7** describes Sapphira coming to the church *"about the space of three hours after."* We must remember that the Holy Spirit inspired words that people would normally understand and speak, but this does not mean that He was uncertain! The events of **John 1:39** and **Acts 5:7** did happen at a specific moment, although that moment is not recorded. And the very mention of *"the number of names"* in **Acts 1:15** shows that a collection actually existed, even though we are not told the exact number. The important thing to note is not that there were 119, 120, or 121, but that there actually was a *"number of the names together."* In short, a membership of definite individuals made up that church.

II SPECIFIC PEOPLE WERE ADDED TO THE MEMBERSHIP OF THE CHURCH ON THE DAY OF PENTECOST.

According to **Acts 2:41**, *"Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there*

were added unto them about three thousand souls."

Again, the word "*about*" has the same significance. The important word is "*added*" showing that the number grew.

Whether they were written down on paper is not the issue; the fact is that certain specific people were saved, baptized, and added to certain specific people!

Though some would interpret this to mean that they were added to the Lord, or to the whole body of Christ, the context has been speaking of that group of 120, ever since **Acts 1:15**, and continues to speak of that earthly group which met together in Jerusalem, through **2:47**).

III. THERE WAS A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE CHURCH AND OUTSIDERS.

Acts 5:11 contrasts "*the church*" with others who "*heard these things.*" It is referring to the surprising deaths of Ananias and Sapphira when it says "*And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things.*"

would be impossible to admonish him if they never associated with or spoke to him. To "*have no company*" must mean church company or fellowship, preventing him from the privileges of membership (holding office, voting, etc.)

How is exclusion to be accomplished if there is never any inclusion?

VIII. THERE IS NO WAY TO EXERCISE CHURCH DISCIPLINE UNLESS THERE IS A MEMBERSHIP.

See **Matthew 18:15-17**.

How would you hold someone accountable if there were no mandate for physical membership? If a body of believers is the final appeal in a case of unrepentant sin, how would it call someone to repentance if there were no actual membership to that body that is trying to call one to repentance?

for? Surely he will not be answerable for every member of the body of Christ universally whether he met them once in a coffee shop or twice on a Sunday morning.

How does he know? He does not without a membership. Pastoral ministry requires local church membership.

VII. THE CORINTHIAN CHURCH WAS COMMANDED TO EXCLUDE SOME BRETHREN.

"But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat" (1 Corinthians 5:11). This eating could not refer to ordinary meals, since the Lord Jesus ate with publicans and sinners (**Matthew 9:10**). It must refer to eating at the Lord's table. He likewise says, *"... put away from among yourselves that wicked person" (1 Corinthians. 5:13).* This could not mean to stop associating with, or speaking to, such a person, because a parallel passage in **2 Thessalonians 3:14-15** says, *"... note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother."* It

Therefore, it must have been common knowledge that some specific persons belonged to the church, while others did not. And we must remember that the Holy Spirit inspired these words, so it was actually He that made this difference.

IV. SOME PEOPLE DID NOT DARE TO JOIN THE CHURCH.

Immediately after the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira and subsequent miracles by the apostles, **Acts 5:13** tells us that *"of the rest durst no man join himself to them: but the people magnified them."* It was common knowledge who belonged to this new church, and after such a harsh judgment on two members who did not conform, some people did not dare to join them! Some belonged; others dared not join, for one reason or another.

When one joins, there is a membership!

V. SPECIFIC MEMBERS ELECTED OFFICERS.

The apostles commanded the congregation, *"Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business"* (Acts 6:3). They were speaking to a specific group whom they knew as *"brethren."* They said that these men were to be chosen from *"among you"* obviously designating a specific group of people.

Any way we look at this, there must have been a membership.

VI. ELDERS WERE RESPONSIBLE FOR CERTAIN PEOPLE.

The Ephesian elders were told to feed the church of God, the flock, over which the Holy Ghost had made them overseers (Acts 20:28). Obviously, the church, the flock, was a specific group of people. How else could

these elders carry out their responsibilities? It had to be clearly known who made up the church, the flock. Such would be a membership.

How does the relationship of the pastor and submitted person exist without membership? How do we know who we are to submit to, and how does the leader know who he is responsible for except there be a membership.

See **Hebrews 13:17**. The command to obey your leaders requires local church membership.

I have seen the abuses of pastoral authority just like you have, and it would cause one to react in the opposite direction and have a hard time with church membership. However, this reaction against abuse does not void what the Bible states in the clear instruction of **Hebrews 13:17**.

How does a pastor know who the Holy Spirit has made him the overseer? Who is he responsible to care