

# Church Membership

---

'The Glorious Body of Christ' is how R B Kuiper described the church. It's so important to have this lofty view of the church: The local church is the primary means that our Lord Jesus Christ, the head of the church, intends to proclaim the Gospel, make disciples of the nations, equip the saints and restore backsliders – in short, God's redemptive plans for the entire world are channelled through the local church.

The church, the body, is made up of parts or members. It is impossible to overstate the privilege that it is to be welcomed into the membership of this glorious body. Consider for a moment the price of admittance; a price so high that no human being could pay it, rather the bill is paid for us in full – the blood of the God-Man, Jesus, shed on the cross.

Maybe you wonder why you should bother with church membership? After all, many churches don't have a membership, plenty of Christians never formally join a church.

**'I don't see what difference it makes having my name on a formal list, it's just a piece of paper!'**

Certainly having those names, that list, is a legal requirement for our churches – as congregational churches we cannot legally function without a membership – our constitutions and trust deeds require it.

That said, there is so much more involved: The name on the paper is not the point, it signifies an attitude of heart, an underlying reality. Think of a marriage certificate – is it significant? My marriage to my wife is so much more than that piece of paper, but it is far from insignificant – it represents the legally binding covenant we have entered into. Membership matters because it signifies a bigger reality.

**'I don't think I should be a member in this church because of A or B.'**

Every local church is imperfect, not just because of A or B, there's C, D and E as well! We are called to submit to, and humble ourselves to imperfect local churches – we are to strive and pray so that under God they would become better, holier, more faithful reflections of what Christ intends for the church.

**'I don't see church membership in the bible.'**

This is the most serious objection that we must carefully answer. The New Testament church never describes a membership roll, so is it a biblical concept?

Every letter of the New Testament assumes that Christians are members of a local church. The very language of member reflects the idea of body parts that Paul uses in addressing the Corinthian church (1 Cor 12). Paul tells the Corinthians they are not to judge those who are outside the church, only those who are inside – they must expel an immoral man from the membership (1 Cor 5), he can only be *put out* if they already know who is *in*.

Elders are told they will have to give an account for their shepherding of the flock – they clearly know who these are.

It is very clear that the NT churches knew who belonged, who were the members – there was a defined number who made up the church, they were countable. They had a membership.

**'What if I don't become a member?'**

If you're not a member of a local church then you're still very welcome to worship there, you're still welcome to the Lord's Supper, a church will pray for you, encourage, help and teach you. Be aware, if you aren't in membership in a church then you and they are impoverished by this – there will be gifts you have that can't be used. In becoming members, we make a serious commitment, we're saying this is where I belong; these are my people, I will give myself to them, love them, I will pray for them, lean on them, share what I have with them, confess my sin to them, forgive them, labour alongside them and one day, rejoice with them in glory.

## **‘What about the members’ meeting?’**

Central to Congregationalism is the principle that Jesus Christ is the head of the church and makes his mind known through the members of the local congregation, as they gather together. For that to happen, each member needs to be a genuine Christian, a born-again believer with a living faith. All the members of the church share that responsibility, and the church meeting is where this takes place.

Sometimes people think that because all the members are involved and share this responsibility, that the church is a democracy, but this misses the point: The church is to be a theocracy, under the rule of God; as we gather we’re not out to have our say, or make sure our voice is heard, we are concerned to hear what God has to say, and that his voice is heard. Since each believer is indwelt by the Holy Spirit and God gives gifts as he pleases, then wisdom, Christ’s leading, can come through any of the members and so we listen attentively to each and examine everything in the light of the bible.

Sadly, the prospect of a church members’ meeting sometimes produces groans rather than delight. This could be for a couple of reasons:

Sometimes Christians are left bruised and wounded by the behaviour of others at church meetings – friends, this should never be so. At times we may disagree with one another but our meetings must be characterised by love, forbearance and grace. Where this has happened, as churches we must repent and resolve to change things.

Sometimes church meetings can get bogged down in trivial matters of administration or building maintenance, things that very few would be excited about. Reading the New Testament, I find church meetings sending missionaries, praying, bringing reports from mission work, receiving new members, arranging acts of charity, clarifying doctrine, appointing deacons and where necessary, disciplining members. They dealt with things of eternal consequence – we might look forward more to members’ meetings if we concentrated on such weighty and exciting matters.

Participating in a meeting like that is an enormous responsibility and privilege – the most significant things you ever discuss, consider and decide will be when the church meets like this.

*The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, speaking about Congregationalism says: ‘It requires a very high standard of Christian devotion to maintain it.’<sup>1</sup>

In Acts 6, the whole church is involved in recognising the graces God has given to certain men and they are appointed as deacons. Notice that initiative is taken by the leadership (apostles in this instance). We must say that elders/pastors are to rule/lead/shepherd. This is not contrary to congregational principles. There is a delicate balance to keep here, sometimes we’ll get this wrong in either direction – elders acting in an authoritarian manner or church members failing to submit to their leaders. How will we respond to each other and God when we do get this wrong? We need to do so humbly, graciously and peaceably – repenting quickly and forgiving gladly.

Here is the other challenge of our form of church government – the whole church decides things, as Christ makes his mind known through the church. At the same elders/pastors are to rule/lead/shepherd.

May God enable us to grasp the privilege it is to be members in a local church, may he equip us with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

---

1 F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, Eds., [\*The Oxford dictionary of the Christian Church\*](#), 2005, 402.