

These leaders are to shepherd and feed God's people (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:2), to labor diligently among God's people (1 Thess 5:12), to watch over God's people (1 Tim 5:17, Heb 13:7, 17), to be prepared to give an account to God for their service to God's people (Heb 13:17), and to be examples to God's people (1 Pet 5:3). In turn, God's people are to esteem them highly (1 Thess 5:13), to honor and recompense them (1 Tim 5:17-18), to follow them (Heb 13:7), and to obey and submit to them (Heb 13:17). These responsibilities require that there be a mutually understood membership within a local church assembly. Leaders can not shepherd and give an account to God for people they do not know. They must know who is in the flock and who is not. Leaders can only shepherd those who have submitted themselves to their care, and this entails church membership.

#5: The Exercise of Church Discipline

Jesus provided the outline for church discipline in Matthew 18:15-17. First, when a believer sins against another believer, the offended party is to confront them privately (Verse 15). If the sinning brother refuses to repent, the offended party is to take one or two more believers with them to confront him again in the presence of witnesses (Verse 16). If the sinning brother still refuses to repent, the matter is to be taken before the church (Verse 17). If the sinning brother still refuses to repent, he is to be excluded from the church assembly (Verse 17). These principles of church discipline require that the membership of a local assembly be clearly identified. A local church assembly has no grounds to discipline people outside of their assemblies (1 Cor 5:12-13). It is also clear that membership within a local church assembly involves submitting to the Biblical accountability of the leaders and members of that assembly.

#6: The Equipping for Spiritual Growth

While individual believers should be diligent in their personal and private study of God's Word, the Bible is clear that the local church has been specially equipped by God for the instruction, equipping, edifying, and growth of believers (Eph 4:7-16). God appoints the leadership within the local churches (Acts 20:28) and He has directed them to instruct His people (Acts 15:35, 1 Tim 3:2, 2 Tim 2:2) and to protect them from false teaching (1 Tim 1:3-10, Tit 1:9-14). You should be diligent to unite with a local assembly where the leaders provide

detailed and thorough teaching of God's Word. To abstain from this instruction is to isolate yourself from one of God's primary means for your spiritual growth and it leaves you vulnerable to the influence of false teaching.

#7: The Exhortation to Edify One Another

The refusal of a believer to commit themselves to a local church assembly not only hurts themselves, it also does a disservice to other believers (Heb 10:24-25). The New Testament is filled with exhortations to seek the good of one another. For example, the Scriptures say we are to "love one another" (John 13:34), "admonish one another" (Rom 15:14), "serve one another" (Gal 5:14), "bear ye one another's burdens" (Gal 6:2), "comfort one another" (1 Thess 4:18), "edify one another" (1 Thess 5:11), etc. – just to name a few. These exhortations were clearly given to believers who knew one another and shared fellowship within the same assembly of believers.

The New Testament is also clear that if you are a child of God, you have been given special spiritual gifts by the Spirit of God (1 Cor 12:1-11). These gifts are to be used for the edification ("building up") of other believers within the local church assembly (1 Cor 12:7, 14:12, 26). To absent yourself from the Lord's local church is to misappropriate God's work in you and to disservice your fellow believers.

Closing Remarks

God's plan for local church membership is set forth very clearly in His Word. It is simple, it is straight forward, and it is best. We certainly can not improve upon God's plan, and we are not wise to ignore it. Get off the fence and obey the Lord – for He is coming soon! Amen.

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CHURCH MEMBERSHIP



The Biblical Basis and Pattern

by Jason Butte

We live in a day when there is much confusion concerning the necessity and importance of membership in a local church. However, the thought of a Christian not being an active member of a local church body is an idea that is completely foreign to the New Testament Scriptures. It is crucial that every Christian understand what church membership is and why it is important.

Church Membership - Defined

When a person is saved, they are "in Christ" (Rom 8:1, 16:7) and Christ is "in them" (Col 1:27, Rom 8:9). The first step of obedience after beginning to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ is to publicly identify with Jesus by following His example of submitting to Scriptural baptism (Acts 2:41, 18:8). In the New Testament, instead of continuing on in a private devotion to Christ, we find that baptized believers formally joined themselves with other believers and committed themselves to the apostles teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer (Acts 2:41-42).

To become a member of a church means to formally commit oneself to union with an identifiable body of believers for the purpose of fulfilling the Lord's commands and purpose. In the New Testament, we find that the church assembled to receive instruction from God's Word (Acts 11:26, 1 Tim 4:13), to edify one another (1 Thess 5:11, 1 Cor 14:12, 26), to partake of the Lord's Supper (Acts 2:42, 1 Cor 11:20-34), and for prayer (Acts 1:14, 2:42, 12:5). These believers strived together in labor and prayer for the chief purpose of fulfilling the Lord's command to "make disciples" (Matt 28:18-20; Mark 16:15).

To be a "disciple" literally means to be a "learner" of Jesus. Every Christian is a disciple of Christ – the words are synonymous in Scripture (Acts 11:26). Disciple making is the primary task of the church (Matt 28:19-20). So, to be an active church member means to be active in seeking to personally "learn" more of Jesus. Additionally, it means to be actively seeking to lead others to become disciples, as well as assisting other existing disciples in their learning more of Jesus. Thus, to be an active, Biblical church member entails much more than simply having one's name on a membership roster and showing up for meetings and activities.

Church Membership – Indicative

If you are not an active church member, you either have a serious misunderstanding of your responsibility in the service of Christ (which should be remedied upon receiving this teaching) or you are not a Christian at all. To profess to be a Christian and yet lack the desire to join with other believers is to lack the fruit of salvation. The Scriptures clearly command the assembling together of believers (Heb 10:25). Disobedience to this command is an indicator of lack of love for Jesus and for one's brethren. Love for Jesus is a clear identifying mark of a true believer (John 8:42, 1 Cor 16:22). Jesus said that the one who truly loves Him is the one who obeys Him (John 14:15, 21, 23-24). Jesus commanded and placed a large emphasis on love for other believers (John 13:35, 15:12, 17). The Scriptures clearly proclaim that the presence or absence of this love is an indicator of genuine faith (1 John 3:14, 4:20-21).

In consideration of the Scripture's teaching, it would be difficult for one to substantiate their love for the Lord and their brethren when they are blatantly disobeying their Lord and have no sincere desire to be with their brethren. God places His love within the hearts of His children (Rom 5:5). This love ("agape") is a sacrificial, willful love (1 John 3:14-18, 1 Cor 13:1-7). This love is not easily and continually overcome by selfish and carnal desires to stay home and watch TV, to go shopping, etc. The Bible says, "In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God, *neither he that loveth not his brother.*" That is pretty clear talk. Upon receiving the instruction of this teaching, if you can continue on in spiritual apathy and disregard for the Lord's church – you are probably not a Christian.

Church Membership – God's Revealed Plan

The expectation that a true believer in Christ would assemble with other believers in a local church permeates the New Testament. We will consider seven aspects that will make this truth abundantly clear.

#1: *The Word Chosen for "Church" ("Ecclesia")*

The word Jesus chose to define His "church" is the Greek word "ecclesia". It literally means "called out" or "called out assembly". This word is unique because

there are many other words the Lord could have used if He desired to denote a loose association of chosen individuals. "Ecclesia" was the word used to denote the organized, legal assemblies in Greek city-states. The town crier would go through the town and he would "call out" the legal citizens who would then *assemble* for a specific purpose. The word denotes actual people who assembled in an actual location. Thus, even from the word "church" we see the importance of Kingdom citizens assembling together for the Lord's purpose (cf. Matt 18:20).

#2: *The Terminology of the New Testament*

Any honest consideration of the New Testament will readily confess that the Scriptures declare the reality of individual, local church assemblies. For example, the Scriptures consistently uses terminology that denotes individual churches (Acts 14:23) in specific locations (1 Cor 16:19). The Scriptures use such phrases as "the churches of Christ" (Rom 16:16), "in every church" (1 Cor 4:17), and "in all churches" (1 Cor 7:17). In Revelation Chapters 2 & 3, Jesus (who is the Head and builder of His Church) acknowledged the local nature of His church when He sent letters to seven of these churches (Rev 1:4-3:22). The Lord Jesus Christ recognized these various churches as His own (See also Rev 22:16). Thus, the expression of the Lord's church on the earth is in local, assembling bodies of believers. If a believer is not assembling with other believers in a local church, they are outside of God's plan and pattern revealed in His Word.

#3: *The Context of the New Testament*

To miss the local nature of the church is to entirely miss the stated context of much of the New Testament writings. The book of Acts chronicles the founding, organizing, and building up of local churches. The epistles of the New Testament were written primarily to local church assemblies. Other epistles, such as 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon, were written to leaders of local churches. To deny the Biblical reality and importance of local church assemblies is to close one's eyes to God's clearly stated revelation in His Word.

#4: *The Existence of Church Leadership*

The outline of church leadership in the New Testament necessitates that the leaders have a clearly identified group of church members who are under their care.