

6

A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

- I. Membership in the Bible
- II. Membership is Commitment
- III. Big Gap Between Membership and Involvement
- IV. Membership is a Responsibility
- V. Membership is a Corporate Testimony to Salvation
- VI. Meaningful Membership

Membership in the Bible

In one sense what we know today as "church membership" is not biblical. We have no record of first-century Christians who lived, say, in central Jerusalem deciding to become involved in one particular assembly of Christians rather than another. From what we can tell, there was no church shopping because there was only one church in a community. In that sense, we know of no list of church members in the New Testament. But there are lists of people connected with the church in the New Testament. These are either widows supported by the church (I Timothy 5) or the names in the Lamb's Book of Life (Philippians 4:3; Revelation 21:27). And there are passages in the New Testament which imply definition and clear boundaries to a church's membership. Churches knew those who composed their membership. For example, Paul's letters to the Corinthian church show that some individuals were to be

excluded (e.g., I Cor. 5) and that some were to be included (e.g., II Cor. 2). In this latter example, Paul even mentions a "majority" of people (II Cor. 2:6) who were referred to as having "inflicted the punishment" of exclusion from the church. This "majority" could only be referring to a majority of the group of people who were recognized as the church's members.

The practice among Christians of church membership has developed as an attempt to help us grasp hold of each other in responsibility and love. By identifying ourselves with a particular church, we let the pastors and other members of that local church know that we intend to be committed in attendance, giving, prayer and service. We increase others' expectations of us in these areas, and we make it known that we are the responsibility of this local church. We assure the church of our commitment to Christ in serving with them, and we call for their commitment to serve us in love and to encourage us in our discipleship.

Membership is Commitment

In this sense, church membership is a biblical idea. It comes from, among other things, Paul's use of body imagery about the local church. It comes from Christ's saving us by His grace and placing us in churches to serve Him in love as we serve others. It comes from our mutual obligations as spelled out in Scripture's "together" and "one another" passages. All of these are encapsulated in the covenant of a healthy church (see appendix).

It should come as no surprise that bringing our understandings of evangelism, conversion and the gospel more in line with the Bible has implications for the way we conceive of church membership. We will begin to view membership less as a loose affiliation useful only on occasion and more as a regular responsibility involving us in one another's lives for the purposes of the gospel.

It is not uncommon to find a big gap between a church's membership and the number of those actively involved.

Big Gap Between Membership and Involvement

Imagine a church of 3,000 members with only 600 in regular attendance. I fear that many evangelical pastors today would be more proud of the stated membership than distressed by the attendance. According to one recent Southern Baptist Convention study, this is normal in Southern Baptist churches. The typical Southern Baptist church has 233 members and 70 at the Sunday morning worship service. Is our giving any better? Which congregations have budgets that equal—let alone exceed—10% of the combined annual incomes of their members?

Membership is
a Responsibility

Except where physical limitations prevent attendance or financial burdens prevent giving, wouldn't this situation suggest that membership has been presented as not necessarily entailing involvement? Yet what do such numbers of members mean? Written numbers can be idols as easily as carved figures—perhaps more easily. But it is God who will assess our lives, and He will weigh our work, I think, rather than count our numbers. If the church is a building, then we must be bricks in it; if the church is a body, then we are its members; if the church is the household of faith, it presumes we are part of that household. Sheep are in a flock, and branches on a vine. Biblically, if one is a Christian he must be a member of a church. Leaving aside the concrete particulars for a moment—whether membership lists are kept on white cards or on computer disks—we must not forsake our regular assembling (Hebrews 10:25). This membership is not simply the record of a statement we once made or of affection toward a familiar place. It must be the reflection of a living commitment, or it is worthless, and worse than worthless, it is dangerous.

Membership is
a Corporate
Testimony to
Salvation

Uninvolved members confuse both real members and non-Christians about what it means to be a Christian. And “active” members do the voluntarily “inactive” members no service when they allow them to remain members of the church; for membership is the church's corporate endorse-

ment of a person's salvation. Again, this must be clearly understood: membership in a church is that church's corporate testimony to the individual member's salvation. Yet how can a congregation honestly testify that someone invisible to it is faithfully running the race? If members have left our company and have not gone to any other Bible-believing church, what evidence do we give that they were ever part of us? We do not necessarily know that such uninvolved people are not Christians; we may simply be unable to affirm that they are. We don't have to tell them that we know they're going to Hell, only that we can't tell them that we know they are going to Heaven.

Meaningful
Membership

For a church to practice biblical church membership requires not perfection, but honesty. It calls not for bare decisions, but for real discipleship. It is made up not of individual experiences alone, but of corporate affirmations by those in covenant with God and with each other. Personally, I hope to see the membership numbers of the church I serve become more meaningful, as all who are members in name become members in fact. For many, this has meant having their names leave our rolls (though not our hearts). For others, it has meant a renewed commitment to the life of our church. New members are being instructed in the faith and in the life of our church. Many of our current members need similar instruction and encouragement. As we have sought to become the healthy Baptist church we were historically, our number in attendance has once again exceeded the number of members. Surely this should be your desire for your church as well.

A recovered practice of careful church membership will have many benefits. It will make our witness to non-Christians more clear. It will make it more difficult for weaker sheep to go straying from the fold, while still considering themselves sheep. It will help to give shape and focus to the discipleship of more mature Christians. It will aid our

church leaders in knowing exactly who they are responsible for. In all of this, God will be glorified.

Pray that church membership may come to mean something more than it currently does, so that we can better know those for whom we're responsible, so that we can pray for them, encourage them and challenge them. We should not allow people to keep their membership in our churches for sentimental reasons. Considered biblically, such membership is no membership at all. In our church's covenant we also pledge that "We will, when we move from this place, as soon as possible unite with some other church where we can carry out the spirit of this covenant and the principles of God's Word." This commitment is part of healthy discipleship, particularly in our transient age.

Church membership means being incorporated in practical ways into the body of Christ. It means traveling together as aliens and strangers in this world as we head to our heavenly home. Certainly another mark of a healthy church is a biblical understanding of church membership.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Does the Bible make explicit mention of membership rolls in a local church? Where is it implicit? Read I Corinthians 12:14-26. How can church membership help us as Christians to live out these obligations we have to one another as Christ's body?

2. The author writes that we should view church membership "less as a loose affiliation useful only on occasion and more as a regular responsibility involving us in one another's live for the purposes of the gospel." In light of that statement, how do most of your members view their membership? What are the responsibilities of a church member? How can the fulfillment of those responsibilities

contribute to the work of the gospel?

3. The author believes that church membership must be the reflection of a living commitment to Christ, or else it is worthless and even dangerous. Why might that be true? What does a living commitment to Christ and His church look like?

4. Church membership, the author writes, is a church's corporate testimony to an individual member's salvation. Read Hebrew 13:17. The Bible teaches that church leaders will be required to "give an account" for those under their care. Do you think this "account" will simply be a statement that a person once made a decision for Christ, or is it a knowledgeable testimony that a person is faithfully bearing fruit in the gospel? How does this affect our understanding of who should be on our membership rolls?

5. The author lists several benefits of carefully guarding our church membership rolls. How would a biblical understanding of church membership make our witness to non-Christians clearer? How would it make it more difficult for weaker Christians to stray while still considering themselves Christians? How would it help to give shape and focus to the discipleship of mature Christians?