

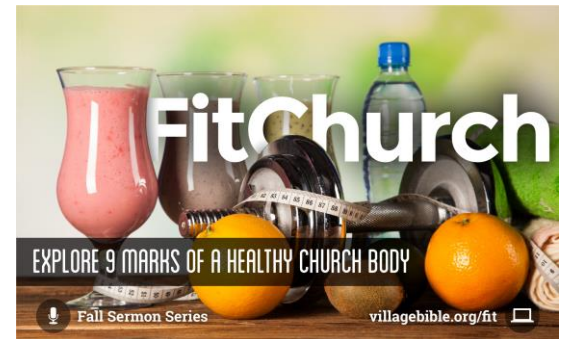


VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH
SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

Membership Has Its Privileges

FitChurch: 9 Marks of a Healthy Church Body, Part 6

Tim Badal | October 26, 2014 | Hebrews 10:22-25



Currently, our church is looking at the marks of a healthy church in our series, “FitChurch.” This week, we are addressing Biblical church membership. Normally, our preaching style is exegetical. We usually go verse by verse through books of the Bible. There is an immense benefit to this style of preaching, and in a month we will be starting the Book of Colossians. We also look at topical issues like this to ask questions and see what the entirety of Scripture says about a particular subject. Over the last few weeks we’ve been asking ourselves two questions:

1. What are the marks of a healthy church?
2. How do we improve the health of our church?

The elders of our church believe that church membership is Biblical, something found throughout Scripture and something in which we want to encourage the congregation to participate.

Turn in your Bibles to Hebrews 10:19-25. This is what the writer of Hebrews says to the church:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus,²⁰ by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh,²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God,²² let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.²³ Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.²⁴ And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works,²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

Many years ago, there was an American Express commercial where every time a businessman used his credit card, something good would happen. He went on a trip and at the ticket counter the woman behind the counter said, “Sir, you’re in coach, but because you have an American Express card we have an upgrade to first class for you.” At another point in the commercial, a man says to the businessman, “I see you’re with American Express. We have a deal for our members.” And yet another time, the businessman is standing in front of a wrecked car, smoke is pouring out from under the hood. The rain is pouring down. Nothing could make this situation any worse. He takes out his American Express card and immediately the scene changes. Instead of a wrecked car, he drives away in a brand new one. After all this, the booming voice of the narrator comments, “Membership has its privileges.” They remind their viewers that if you are an American Express member, there are many perks and opportunities available. Because of that membership, things that were previously unavailable become obtainable.

Church membership isn’t a difficult concept. Our lives are full of different kinds of membership. Most of you are members of health clubs or work out facilities. You might have memberships with certain hotel chains and resorts. As you collect points, you are given opportunities to use those points for free nights away or other perks. There are memberships to clothing stores that give special deals to members. Stores like Sam’s Club and Costco require memberships to buy their merchandise. All of us are part of memberships. We show our card and we’re in. Whether social groups or grocery stores, we commit to these memberships because of the privileges that come with them.

In a similar way, there are benefits and privileges for joining a church. The perks aren't like other memberships. We don't provide valet parking. We don't hand members Starbucks coffee when they arrive at church. However, there are many perks and privileges, not from a consumer point of view, but from a Scriptural one. It is good to be part of a local church. It is good to commit yourself to another group of people, be held accountable by them and be nurtured by them.

What does church membership mean? Here is the church's statement on membership:

While all believers are part of the Universal Church, the New Testament also stresses the importance of all believers being part of a local church. A local church is comprised of a definable group of people who, on the basis of their commitment to the Lord, have identified themselves with and committed themselves to one another. While membership in a local church does not guarantee one's salvation, it is imperative for all believers to be connected to a body of believers for the sake of encouragement, edification and equipping.

While church membership gives the believers certain rights within a local congregation, its purpose is far more Biblical. In a God-ordained environment of a local church, members function as one body, building up each other in love according to the rule of Scripture. Throughout Scripture, it is clear that God intended for His people to enter into covenants with Him and with one another. Membership at Village Bible Church is a covenant relationship among fellow believers, as well as with their leaders under Christ. In order to implement the principles of accountability and commitment to the local body of Christ as defined in the New Testament and practiced in the early church, Village Bible Church recognizes the need for formal membership (Acts 11:26; Romans 16:1; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 2 Corinthians 8:1; Philippians 1:1).

Some of these statements need a little explanation. What we mean by "the Universal Church" is the church that God sees. When God looks down from heaven, He sees one church. He doesn't see Village Bible Church in one place, and First Baptist Church in another place, etc. He sees one Church, the Body of Christ. All believers are part of that. You cannot take a membership class to become part of the Universal Church; that only happens when you bow the knee to Christ and accept Him as your Lord and Savior. All believers are part of the Universal Church. Don't miss out on being a part of that Church.

The "local church" is a group of people meeting in a certain location, a smaller group that is part of the bigger, invisible Church. This group meets "on the basis of their commitment to the Lord." They don't just say, "We're going to get together and talk about things. We have a great projector and a big screen; we'll just put the Bears game on. We'll just do things together and enjoy ourselves." The church gathers together because of their commitment to the Lord and to His Word. They've identified themselves with and committed themselves to one another. The local church says, "As members of this body, we are joining together under the cross of Jesus Christ. We do this so that we can worship and adore Jesus and help one another do the same."

The statement, "membership in a local church does not guarantee one's salvation," means that on the Lord's Judgment Day, men and women will stand before God the Judge. God will ask, "Why should I allow you into My heaven?" Your answer cannot be, "I was a member of Village Bible Church." It doesn't matter what church you are part of when it comes to salvation. Church membership does not separate the sheep from the goats. The basis of your salvation is bowing the knee to Christ by grace through faith alone. Please do not think that if you're not a member of this church, you can't be a Christian. However, "it is imperative for all believers to be connected to a body of believers for the sake of encouragement, edification (building others up) and equipping."

The membership statement goes on to say, "church membership gives the believers certain rights within a local congregation." As members of this local body, you can vote on issues like bringing on new staff members, building new buildings and whether or not to take on more debt. Members help make decisions that affect the church's vision. You cannot teach in our local assembly without being a member. You cannot hold a leadership position without being a member here. There are some rights that come through membership within our local congregation. We believe that these things are small in light of membership's Scriptural purposes.

God intends for people to enter into covenants with Himself. This happens throughout the Old Testament. Communion also demonstrates this. This is a new covenant that God makes with His people, a covenant of grace and mercy. God also calls us to covenant with one another. Therefore we believe that "membership at Village Bible Church is a covenant relationship among fellow believers, as well as with their leaders under Christ." Church membership is the mechanism for accountability within the local church.

This sermon is for two groups of people:

1. Non-members. What prevents you from becoming a church member?
2. Members. What should church membership look like? What is it all about?

1. The reluctance to church membership

Perhaps you are reluctant to become a member because:

You are new to the church

You might hear the words “commitment” and “covenant” and think, “Wait a minute, I’m just getting to know you!” Rarely on the first date would you say, “Let’s plan the wedding. Let’s talk about having children. How will we spend our elder days together?” There’s a period of courtship. You might be new to Village Bible Church for three reasons:

1. Maybe someone invited you and you are new to the church experience. You are new to Christianity. All of this can be overwhelming. You might be thinking, “I’m still considering Jesus right now.” Or, “I’ve just come to know Jesus within the last few months. All of this is brand new. I’m not quite ready to join a church.” That takes time. You have exploring to do.
2. Maybe you are transitioning from one area of the country to this area. Maybe you were a member somewhere else. Now you’ve started coming to Village Bible Church and you hear “commitment” and “covenant,” and you think, “I’m just starting to get to know you. I’m still trying to understand who you guys are. How do I know that you’re not crazy? How do I know that you preach and teach Biblical truth?” Those are good questions.
3. Maybe you’ve been a member at another church and you have made the decision to cease your involvement at that other church. Now you’re looking for a new church and Village Bible Church is where you find yourself.

All of these options are common—and sometimes necessary—experiences. Take your time and make a wise decision. However, you need to be part of a local church. You need to be a member. At Village Bible Church, we do not view other churches in our area as competition. We see them as our friends and fellow co-workers in the faith. Even if we wanted to, we could not take care of every spiritual need that people in Sugar Grove have, let alone the entire Fox Valley area. We love it when more churches spring up in our area. Those other churches can do things that our church may not be as equipped to do. They have strengths and abilities that are different from ours. We encourage those churches. The intent here is not, “Come and join our church.” If our church isn’t the church you decide to commit to, commit to one of the other Bible-believing churches in the area. We want to welcome people into our church, but we also want you to find a place to which you can fully commit yourself, where you can express yourself to the fullness for which God made you, so that you might serve Him and serve others in the totality of who you are.

If you find yourself in any of these three categories, I want you to pray. If you are not covenanted to a church, you are outside the protection of the church. God has given you a local body of believers; being outside of that, though necessary at times, is dangerous. You might never find the church that you’re looking for and consequently stop going to church altogether. You might think that you can just stay home and watch church on TV. That cannot meet your needs like a present, physical church.

If you are looking for a church, here are three questions to ask:

1. How well do they follow the Scriptures? You need to examine what they are preaching and teaching to the adults, students and children. What is their heart’s cry? Do they see the Scriptures as merely a therapeutic book that will help people get through the day? Or, do they see it as the power of God that changes lives? Is it their final authority in all matters of faith and life? Do they provide their congregation with a steady diet of how God’s Word applies to their lives? *Christianity Today* recently published an article that said due to the Internet and the traveling ease that cars provide, most people choose a church based upon personal preferences. Go beyond your personal preference and ask yourself, “What are they preaching?”
2. How well do the shepherds lead? The Bible says that Christians should have leaders within the church to be their shepherds. They will lead and guide, and at times, corral you from wandering away. As you search for a church, ask, “How well do the leaders lead? Are they men whose faith I want to emulate? When I see them in the grocery store, are they the same person I see in church? Are they men whom I can go to for counsel, wisdom and guidance? Are they trustworthy? Do they live out the principles of 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and Titus 1:5-16? Are they men of character and courage? Are they competent in handling Scripture?”
3. How do the sheep look? There will be times when you encounter a church with excellent preachers and elders, but the sheep are malnourished and underfed. Are the sheep confident in their shepherds? Do they have a relationship with them, or are they fearful of them? Are the shepherds willing to lay their lives down for the sheep? Are they

willing to serve them and care for them, counsel and guide them? Do you see a group of people who willingly submit to their leadership? You cannot just look at a church's pastoral staff in order to understand the church. Pastors can be excellent salesmen. Find five people who have been at the church for at least a year, and ask them, "How has this church helped you grow spiritually? How is this church providing the care, nurture and ministry that you need?" If you can't find five people who can say five positive things about the church, there's a problem with the church. If a church serves and follows God in a Biblical way, the church will be healthy and any member of the congregation will be able to tell you why.

It doesn't matter what games the youth group does, what kind of sanctuary they have, the drums they have, or anything else that is secondary in nature. It's not that those things don't have a place in your decision, but if you can't answer those three questions, don't worry about the secondary issues. Ask these questions when you're seeking a new church.

You are unaware of the concept

Perhaps you have been part of this church—or another one—and you have heard about membership, but it went in one ear and out the other. You don't spend a lot of time thinking about it. Perhaps you are aware of membership, but you don't understand the importance of it.

You are critical of membership

You are averse to the concept of membership for various reasons:

- You might think that membership isn't mentioned in the Bible. Not participating in membership because the word "membership" isn't found in the Bible is like not worshipping the Trinity because the word "Trinity" is not found in the Bible. Though the word "Trinity" isn't found in the Bible, it is implied. We affirm Sunday schools and missions agencies, but these too are not clearly stated in the Bible. Therefore, this line of thinking doesn't stand. Membership is all over the Bible.
- You might think that your faith is private. Your faith is personal, not private. Personal and private are two different things. Your faith must be your own. Personal means that you make a decision for yourself as an individual. Private means that you don't want anyone else to be part of it. The New Testament shows us that your faith is a personal thing, but it is corporate as well.

Far too many Christians are not practicing church membership. Because of this many people are constantly hopping from one church to another. A local pastor of a mega-church recently opened another campus at a local storefront. The first Sunday at that location, one thousand people came. That pastor got together with other pastors in the area and counted up how many of that thousand were from other churches. Out of one thousand people, about 850 of them attended other churches in the area. People date the church and when the church stops doing something that is important to their preferences, they leave and look for something else. Church membership says, "I will commit myself to this place, knowing that this place isn't perfect, knowing that this place isn't the best church in the world. However, it is a good church that does good things and I'm going to commit to it, even when it's difficult to do so." To neglect to become a member of a church reflects a misunderstanding of your responsibility as a believer to the body of Christ. It cuts off the many blessings and opportunities that flow from that commitment.

2. The reasons Village Bible Church practices membership

Why do we practice membership?

The example of the Early Church.

The early church practiced it. In New Testament Christianity, walking with Christ is never separated from the accountability and care of the local church. Acts 2:47, Acts 5:15 and Acts 16:5 all state that people repented, were baptized and added to their number. What was "their number"? Acts 2 talks about the 120 in the upper room. They've experienced the signs and wonders of the gifts of the Spirit. They are filled with the Spirit. They spoke many different kinds of tongues. There was a great spiritual commotion. This breaks out into the marketplace in Jerusalem and people are blown away by what they see. Peter stands up and explains to all the people what is taking place. People receive the message and ask, "What must we do to be saved?" Peter tells them to repent of their sins and be baptized. They bowed the knee to Jesus and were baptized. The Bible says three thousand were added to their number that day. Who was "their number"? The church which grew from 120 to 3,120 that day.

Over and over again in the New Testament, when someone followed Jesus Christ, they were “added to the number.” There was a particular number of Christians that were part of the church.

Throughout the New Testament there are lists of people who were part of the church. In 1 Timothy 5:9, there is a list of widows who received financial support. This was a definable group. Somewhere there is a list of widows who were identified as part of Timothy's church body. There are phrases that indicate membership throughout the entire Book of Acts:

- “The whole congregation”
- “The church in Jerusalem”
- “The disciples in Jerusalem”
- “In every church”
- “The whole church”
- “The elders of the church”

Christianity in the early church was not an individual experience, but a collective group of trusted people. John MacArthur says, “The idea of experiencing salvation without belonging to a local church is foreign to the New Testament.” If we are going to follow in the footsteps of the early church, we will practice church membership.

The existence of church government

Throughout the Scriptures it is made clear that Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church (1 Corinthians 11:3, Ephesians 4:15, Ephesians 5:23). He is the Chief Shepherd of the sheep. The Scriptures also make it clear that there are under-shepherds (1 Timothy 3:1-13, Titus 1:5-16). These under-shepherds are elders who pastor the flock. They teach them, provide for them, minister to them, council them and care for them. Who determines who the elders are? Should we post a wanted ad throughout Sugar Grove? There must be a definable group of people who can say, “This is who our leaders are going to be. We’ve examined them and looked at their character. We are going to put them into this office.” Without that definable group, you cannot have elders. At some point, people have to affirm or deny appointments. You can’t have a man appoint himself an elder and demand that everyone else submit to his leadership.

Likewise, a leader must ask the question, “Who am I leading?” Hebrews 13:17 says, *“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.”* On that Day of Judgment, elders will line up before the throne. God will ask them, “How well did you shepherd My flock?” How do pastors know who is part of the flock that they are responsible for? They need a definable group of people whom they commit themselves to feeding and who, in turn, commit to follow. Your attendance doesn’t make you part of that definable group. Your attendance doesn’t show that you are submitting yourself to the authority of your church elders. However, a commitment does. Membership doesn’t mean blindly following your elders; it means submitting to their leadership and affirming them. They will be accountable to God for how they shepherd you. Without church membership, there is no accountability.

The exercise of church discipline

This is something foreign in many churches today, but it is something the Bible commands. Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5 teach that there are times when a follower of Jesus Christ will live like he or she rejects God’s commands and authority. The church’s job is to hold him accountable. The leadership must approach that brother or sister, trying to bring that wandering sheep back into the fold. The church must make a decision: “Is this individual part of the body or not? Can we endorse this person’s Christianity or not?” The church doesn’t say that the person is going to hell; it withdraws their public approval of that individual. At some point, the church has to make a decision to put someone out of the church. In order to put someone out of the church, there first has to be a mechanism that defines who is within the church.

What are the criteria for determining if someone is in the church? They attended for five weeks? No. Someone must say, “I commit to you with my entire being. If there’s ever a time when I stop living like a follower of Christ and I am put out of the church, it means I am no longer associated with that membership.”

The exhortation for mutual care

Church membership is a commitment to serve the body of Christ through the “one another” commands. It is a commitment to serve Christ and to serve that local body. It is a commitment to use the gifts and abilities God has given you in that particular

church. Church membership is a realization and an articulation that the church can count on you. It tells the church that you are going to faithfully attend. It invites others into your life.

Some of you might not want that kind of relationship in your life. That type of intimate commitment is difficult. It means that you must deny yourself and love people even when you're worn out and spent. Aren't you glad that Jesus didn't say, "Sorry, I can't die for your sins today. The Bears are on"? We need to hold each other accountable to this type of service.

Membership isn't something that we do legalistically. This church practices church membership because good reason and Biblical guidance show us that it is an important thing.

3. The requirements for membership at Village Bible Church

How do you become a church member? Every month we provide church membership classes. It is a two-part class that happens during the first service. There are four requirements for membership at Village Bible Church:

Acknowledge Christ as your Lord and Savior

We won't force membership on anyone. Membership does not save you. However, membership is for believers. If you are not a believer, the question is not "What church can I join?" but "Am I going to follow Jesus?" In your membership interview, the leadership will ask, "Are you a follower of Jesus Christ?" They are going to ask you about the change that has taken place. They are going to ask you about the fruit that you've seen as a result of your conversion.

Without the influence of other believers, you might assume that some of your fruit is real when it isn't. The church doesn't put its stamp of approval on everyone just for the sake of love. It asks hard questions because people can be self-deceived. We need others to validate the truthfulness of our own perceptions. Test yourself and be certain that you are a follower of Christ.

Affirm your faith through baptism

You cannot be a member of this church without first being baptized. You might think that's legalistic. No, but it is Biblical. In the Scriptures when people believed, they were baptized. In Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus says, *"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."* You cannot neglect what Christ has mandated every Christian to do.

When you trust Jesus Christ as your Savior, that is a personal declaration to God. Baptism proclaims to the entire world that you are a follower of Jesus Christ. Membership declares to a definable group of people that you are committed to them. Each of these things has a role. Salvation is between you and God. Your baptism brings the whole world into that experience. Membership is a commitment to other believers. You cannot have membership without baptism.

Actively participate by playing your part

When you become a member, your church leadership knows that they can count on you. This does not mean that only members are serving and giving faithfully. If you are not a member, we don't know if you are committed to our church because you have never told us that you are. However, we know that our members can be counted on. There is a different type of relationship that exists between members and their leaders. There is a trust and commitment there. A covenant has been signed.

Annually remember your commitments

Many years ago, the members agreed to make membership here dynamic, not static. We want membership here to be unified. Because of that, we have our members reaffirm their commitment to this church every January. People can change their mind. The church may change directions. Therefore we pause and ask our members, "Are you still with us? Can we count on you to be with us this year?" Every year we reaffirm and remember our commitment. This isn't some decision we made twenty years ago; it is something we regularly remember. If you can't remember what you committed to, how are you going to do it? This is the heart of membership at our church.

4. The reality of church membership

What are you called to as a member of Village Bible Church? What are the privileges of being a member? As a member, you know that you are not alone. You are not just showing up to church. There are seasons when you might feel like the hymn-writer who said, "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love." If you don't think that you are prone to wander, you are self-deceived and you don't see your need for other people. However, if you know that your flesh is weak, then you need other people in your life who will help you. You need people in your life who will throw themselves between you and the oncoming train of sin, even when you don't want it. You don't have to do the Christian life on your own.

What does Hebrews say? Here are some good reminders for us. Remember, Hebrews was written for people who were tempted to wander away from the faith. The author was reminding people to be steadfast. His exhortation is a corporate one. Do you want to follow Christ and be confident and faithful in your walk with Him? You cannot do it by yourself. You must do it with other people. Hebrews constantly says, "Let us..." Let us do what?

- **Let us be open about our sin.** Draw near to God with true and sincere hearts. Members help one another be honest about their sin. "True hearts" in Hebrews 10:19-25 means that you do not have divided loyalties. You don't proclaim to be a follower of Christ and then not live like it. There are areas that you are blind to in your Christian walk; other believers can help you see them. You will never reach your full potential in Christ without someone else walking alongside you. They can show you where you are missing the mark. They can show you areas that you can't see or can't feel in your life, the things that easily entangle you. We need people to be honest with us. We need to help one another see our failings and faults.
- **Let us stand up against wavering.** *"Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering..."* There is a real possibility that you could walk away from your faith. While true believers are saved from beginning to end, how do you know that you're a true believer? True believers will persevere to the end. We need each other to remind us of the work of God in our lives and how we ought to live in light of that. When you are tempted to give up and no longer think the gospel is worth it, then other people can help remind you that we are more than conquerors in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:37). They can remind you that He Who began a good work in you is faithful to see it to completion (Philippians 1:6). Though there will be trouble in this world, take heart, Jesus has overcome the world (John 16:33). In a moment, in a twinkling of an eye, we will all be changed (1 Corinthians 15:52). There is hope in the ongoing reminder that this is not our home. A member's job is to remind others that when the going gets tough, we turn to God and trust Him.
- **Let us stir up love and good deeds.** *"Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works."* Your fellowship with members and encouragement of members needs to be thoughtful. You need to consider. You need to think about it ahead of time. Show up with a plan to serve and grow this church body. Start thinking about how you can help people in this church body before you come to church on Sunday. The word "spur" means to provoke. Provoke one another to love and good deeds. Jab and prod one another. Church membership won't always be comfortable. What are you doing when you go to church? How are you serving? How are you giving? Do these things in love and care for one another. Don't just cow prod people; build up other people. This will take work. Members, be deliberate about this.
- **Let us show up even when it's hard.** Some people in Hebrews were giving up going to church. What does it tell the world—and our other brothers and sisters in Christ—if you only show up 50% of the time? Membership is not; "You can count on me when it is convenient for me." Being a member means being challenged by things like this, so that we might change.

Living out a commitment within a local church isn't easy. Much is expected, but much is at stake. What kind of commitment do you have to the church? If you cannot commit to this church after examining it, maybe it is time to leave and find a church to which you can commit. Find a church where you can invest yourself wholly. If there is something that our church is doing that keeps you from committing, we want you to go to a place that can receive all of you and not just part of you. The Christian life isn't about half of who you are; it's about all of who you are. Our church would love to have you here, but we want all of you. That's what it means to be part of a family, even when it is difficult and hard. Membership matters. Talk to your elders about the issues that might be keeping you from membership. We want to talk about it so that we can be the healthy church that God has called us to be.