
Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many. . . . Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

1 Corinthians 12:12–14, 27

Introduction

With Trepidation and Great Expectation

We begin now what I anticipate will be a six-week Covenant Membership Series. We're going to deal with the subject of church membership in general and church membership at Mercy Hill in particular. There is much in this subject that causes me trepidation. For I know that a topic like church membership grates against the current climate of our culture and the natural drift of our flesh.

- Our culture prizes *individualism*—"Get out of my business. Sure I'm a Christian, but it's just me and Jesus. I don't need the church getting in the way!" But church membership presses in and says: "No! We're in this thing together—I need you in my life; and you need me in yours!"
- Our culture has so fostered *consumerism*—"I'm here only so long as you meet my needs; when you stop satisfying me, I stop coming!" But church membership presses in and says: "No! Though I'm a mess, and you're a mess; though I'm going to hurt you, and you're going to hurt me; I'm committing to you. Not only are we in this Christian life thing together, we are in it for the long haul."
- Our culture preaches *tolerance* as the highest of virtues—"What's true for you is true for you, but don't you try to tell me what's true for me. Don't you get all dogmatic!" But church membership presses in and draws hard lines of truth in love and says with great joy that some appear to be in, and with great sorrow that others appear to be out.

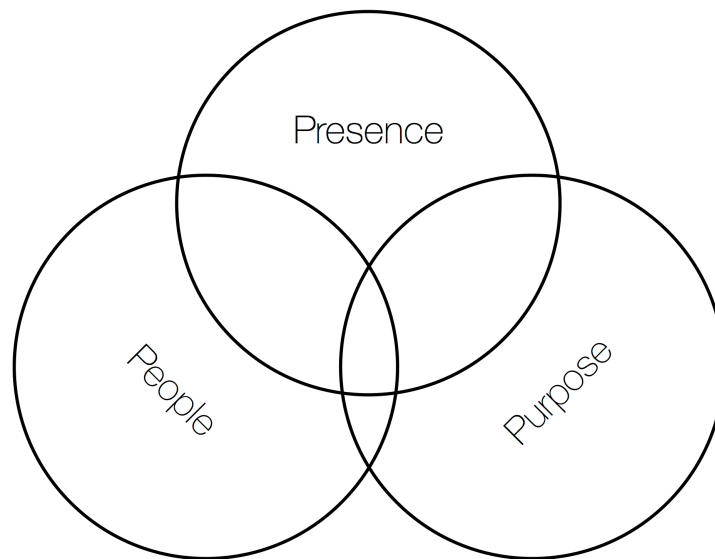
So I don't suppose that these next six weeks are going to be easy, but I do anticipate that they will be glorious! In spite of my trepidation, I enter into this with you with great expectation. Because church membership, I believe, though it might not matter all that much to some of us, matters greatly to God.

What Is the Church?

One Blessed Assembly with Three Distinct Aspects

It occurs to me that, before I can effectively introduce church membership, I should back us up and ask: What is *the church* in the first place? It's a question we all imagine we could answer quite simply, but when we start to make an attempt, we come to face the complexities of it. What is the church? What exactly are we doing here?

Here's my humble attempt at a definition: **The church is that blessed assembly that exists in the *presence* of God, as the *people* of God, for the *purpose* of God.** One blessed assembly, three distinct aspects.



The church is that blessed assembly that exists in the presence of God, as the people of God, for the purpose of God.

The Church in Redemptive History

I've defined the church using these broad terms so as to help us see that the church is not merely a New Testament reality—as if things went terribly wrong with Adam and, later, Israel so he opted for Plan C with “the church”—but a reality that God has been after with us from the very beginning.

1. The First Adam

Consider Adam and Eve:

- In an overflow of joy and love, God creates them and sets them in the garden sanctuary of Eden where He would walk with them (Gen 3:8). His holy *presence* was in their midst.
- And they were to be His *people*. It was not good for man to be alone so “God created man in his own image . . . male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27). And He brought them into covenant relationship with Himself and with one another.
- And He gave to them the unique *purpose* of ruling with Him over the creation and bearing fruit, multiplying, and filling it with more people bearing His image, until His glory filled the earth like the waters cover the sea.

In this sense, humanity was created, from the start, to be the church—to be that blessed assembly that exists in the presence of God, as the people of God, for the purpose of God.

But we would not have it! We abandoned His presence, broke our fellowship with each other, and started living, not for the purpose of God, but for ourselves. And the world went dark.

2. The Second Adam

But God was not satisfied to let the story end here. He begins a countermovement with Israel that, through many ups and downs, ultimately culminates in the arrival of the Christ, Jesus, the light of the world (John 1:9), Immanuel—God with us (Matt 1:23). And through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, broken humanity finally starts to get put back together. Redemption is a restart. Redemption is a rehumanization. All that was lost in Adam is regained in Christ!

Listen to how Peter describes the church as it has been reconstituted around Jesus: “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Pet 2:9–10).

Did you see it?

- The *Presence* of God—we’ve been “called...into His marvelous light” (v. 9b).
- The *People* of God—“once [we] were not a people but now [we] are God’s people” (v. 10a).
- The *Purpose* of God—that we might “proclaim the excellencies of Him” to others, and yet once more fill the earth with renewed image-bearers (v. 9b).

And with Christ now at the helm, this ship will reach its final destination:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.” (Rev 21:1–3)

It is no coincidence that when John sets out to describe the new heavens and new earth for us in Revelation 20-21 he invokes the imagery of Eden. The tree of life forbidden to Adam and Eve after the fall (Gen 3:22-24) is finally granted to the church on that last eternal day (Rev 22:2, 14).

God’s original plan for humanity as the church—in His Presence, as His People, for His purpose—will be fully realized in the end through Christ!

3. The Space Between

But we’re not in Revelation 21 yet, are we? No! We’re back in 1 Peter 2. We’re shining lights in a dark world, calling sinners back to God through the Savior. We have God’s presence, we are God’s people, we live for God’s purpose, but we’re not yet home. We’re still somewhere in the middle of the story. And as such, we are both an echo of Eden and a foretaste of heaven.

We are the church.

What Is Church Membership?

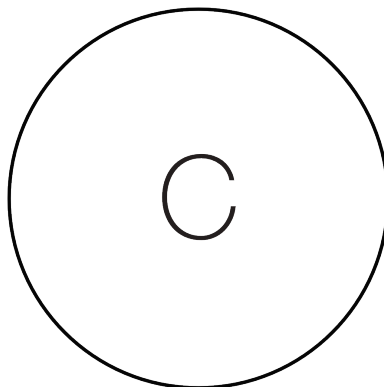
From Universal to Local

So, with this definition in view, what then is church membership? How do I become a part of that blessed assembly?

1. The Universal Church

Church membership broadly conceived, takes place simply by coming to Jesus in repentance and faith. When the gospel is proclaimed, and our hearts are regenerated, and we repent of our sin and trust in Him as our Savior, we are united to Him, and become a member of His body, the church.

We are referring here to what has been called the universal church (church with a capital C). The universal church is that which spans all time and all space. It is the sum total of all who have been united to the Son through the ages.



It's the universal church that the author of Hebrews has in mind when he writes: "You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly ['church'] of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant" (Heb 12:22–24a).

If you have bowed your knee to Christ, then your name is written in the roll-sheet of heaven—the Lamb's book of life—and you are a member in His universal church and are granted the privilege of participating in this kind of cosmic worship service!

(2) The Local Church

But it is not so much membership in this broad sense that we are concerned with here this morning is it? I doubt any would question the validity of church membership along these lines. But O how things get a bit confusing, even controversial, when we start to consider church membership in a narrower sense—when we start considering membership in the local church (church with a lower-case c).

If the universal church is that which spans all time and all space, the local church is that which is confined to this particular time and this particular space—like Mercy Hill Church.

So what should church membership look like at this local level? Is such a thing even important or biblical?

Distinguished But Not Divided

The New Testament would certainly lead us to think so. While it distinguishes between the universal and local church, it sees no division between them. To be a part of the universal church necessarily meant that you would be part of a local church (and vice versa).

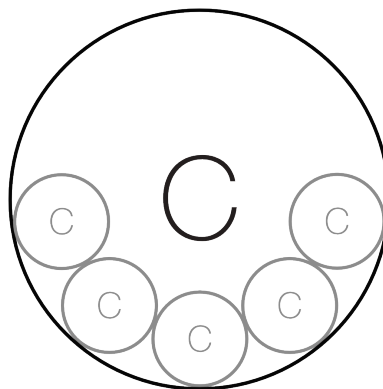
Indeed, one's membership in the universal church is always concretely expressed through vital membership in a local church. There are no drifting Christians; they are all anchored concretely in local assemblies. As Douglas Millar writes: "In the New Testament there is no such person as a Christian who is not a church member. Conversion was described as 'the Lord adding to the church' (Acts 2:47). There was no spiritual drifting."¹

If you were coming to Christ, you were coming into the local church. Period.

In the New Testament there is no such person as a Christian who is not a church member. Conversion was described as "the Lord adding to the church" (Acts 2:47). There was no spiritual drifting.

And, to put it conversely, by coming into the local church you were coming into the church universal. Which is why Paul would open his letter in 1 Corinthians 1:2: "To the church of God that is in Corinth [local], to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours [universal]."

The local assembly is the gateway into the universal assembly. Amazingly, the only way to really enter into Hebrews 12 kind of cosmic worship, is through the little assemblies of local churches! I hope you never look at our fluorescent lights, dusty floors, and wrinkled curtains in the same way again. When you come through the doors of this elementary school, you are ascending mount Zion. We're touching heaven in this place!



¹ As quoted in the *Introduction to Redeemer Seminar Handbook* of Redeemer Presbyterian Church.

Now there are droves of professing Christians in our day that reject almost everything I just said: “Give me the universal church but don’t make me commit to the local church. It just slows me down and gets in the way of my walk with Christ. It’s just an outdated institution. It brings more shame to Christ’s name than honor.”

I don’t want us to feel that way about this or any local church. Christ shed His blood for *this* local church (Acts 20:28)!

Four Strands of Biblical Evidence for Local Church Membership

Let’s quickly consider four strands of biblical evidence that seem to indicate the importance that the early church placed on local church membership. While we cannot say that a formal process of church membership is clearly articulated for us here, we can say that something of the like is clearly implied.

1. It Is Implied in the Records Kept by Local Churches

Consider the New Testament church’s origin there in Jerusalem. On the day of Pentecost, after the outpouring of the Spirit, and the preaching of Peter, we read that “those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls” (Acts 2:41). And they immediately come into the local covenant community of believers: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (v. 42).

Similar statements are made in 2:47; 4:4; 5:14; and 11:24. We get this sense that as people were added to the church, numbers were kept—not because they were concerned with numbers in themselves, but because they were concerned pastorally for each and every soul that the numbers represented.

It seems they had some way of keeping track of who was coming in (cf. 1 Tim 5:3-16 and the enrollment of widows).

2. It Is Implied in the Leader-Member Dynamics of Local Churches

The clearest text for this is Hebrews 13:17: “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.”

Matt Chandler, the lead pastor of a church in Dallas, and the President of the Acts 29 Network of which we are a part, writes of his wrestling through the issue of local church membership. And he points to this verse as the lynchpin. Reflecting on it, he writes:

Two questions occurred to me. First, if there is no biblical requirement to belong to a local church, then which leaders should an individual Christian obey and submit to? Second, and more personally, who will I as a pastor give an account for?

... Regarding the first question, the Scriptures clearly command Christians to submit to and honor an elder body (Heb 13:17, 1 Tim 5:17). If there is no understanding of local church membership, then who are we to submit to and obey? Is it anyone with the title elder from any church? Should you as a Christian obey and submit to those loons at Westboro Baptist? In order to obey Scripture, must you picket soldiers’ funerals, as the pastor of Westboro seems to imply?

Regarding the second question, the Scriptures clearly command an elder body to care for specific people (1 Pet 5:1-5; also, Acts 20:29-30). Will I as a pastor be held accountable for all the Christians in the Dallas Metroplex? There are many churches in Dallas that I have strong theological and philosophical

differences with. Will I give account for what they teach in their small group, how they spend their money, and what they do concerning international missions?²

For Hebrews 13:17 to make any sense, it seems that the early church members must have had a clear idea of who these leaders were that they were to submit to, and that the early church leaders had a clear idea of who these members were that they would give an account to God for—those whom God had put “in [their] charge [‘lot’; ‘share’]” (1 Pet 5:3).

It seems they had some way of drawing these lines.

3. It Is Implied in the Practice of Church Discipline and Excommunication by Local Churches

Matthew 18:15-17 and 1 Corinthians 5 in particular talk about putting a person out of the church due to clear, consistent, calloused, unrepentant sin. But how can you formally put someone out if they were never formally brought in?

4. It Is Implied in the Metaphors Used to Describe Local Churches

Local churches are described as:

- *Flocks*—composed of sheep (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:2-3).
- *Temples*—composed of living stones (Eph 2:19-22; 1 Pet 2:5).
- *Households*—composed of family members (1 Tim 3:15).
- *Bodies*—composed of body parts, or members (1 Cor 12).

Each of these metaphors push us to see the local church as composed of distinct yet vitally connected members.

Whether there was a formal membership process or not, it is clear that these individual believers had joined together in some radically significant way.

- When one sheep goes missing, the good shepherd recognizes it right away and leaves the 99 to go after him.
- When a stone is pulled from the wall of a temple, who wouldn't notice the gaping hole left in its place?
- When a family member has gone AWOL, family meals around the table just aren't the same.
- When a hand is removed from the body, every body part suffers the loss.

Formally Encouraging What the Scriptures Already Require

It might be that all this evidence finally implies is that the early local churches of the New Testament had some sort of informal understanding of church membership. Certainly we are not to suppose that they had some database on their computer where they saved applications, interview notes, signed covenants, and directory info. Whatever they did, they did it differently than we are going to do it here.

But it does seem clear they did something, that they approached the issue in some way. And we should do the same.

By calling us into covenant membership, I am not trying to go beyond what the Scriptures teach. I am actually just trying to formally encourage in our church what the Scriptures already require of us.

² <https://9marks.org/article/journalchurch-membership-biblical/>.

- We're supposed to know who's being added to our assembly by the Lord.
- Members are supposed to submit to, obey, and honor their leaders.
- Leaders are supposed to oversee, shepherd, and care for the members under their charge.
- When members or leaders are hardened in unrepentant sin, we're supposed to have clear ways of removing them from the communion of this church so as to warn the sinner, protect the church's purity, and preserve the honor of Christ.
- We are all supposed to be in intimate, committed, vital communion with one another.

A formal process of church membership simply encourages all of these things and helps to provide a framework for developing them in our church.

By calling us into covenant membership, I am not trying to go beyond what the Scriptures teach. I am actually just trying to formally encourage in our church what the Scriptures already require of us.

The Realities Behind the Formalities

So let me be clear: I don't so much care if you sign your name on the line at the end of this class or not. The formalities of church membership are not what I'm after. I'm after the realities that stand behind them. That's what's important.

Are you a born again, committed, accountable, vital part of this local body or not?

If you answer "Yes" to that question, then why not make it official by covenanting with us as a member. Let it be known that you're all in, that you're not just wanting to date the church but to commit to her.

But if you answer "No" to that question, then there are much more significant matters to talk about than just putting your name on some line. Are you truly born again? Is there some sin in life that you're hiding, and you want to keep the church at a distance? Have you been wounded by the church in the past and now you're afraid to press in? Or is this the right local church for you? I'd be sad if it wasn't, but I want you to find a place you feel you can commit to.

In case you're not yet sure you trust me on the issue, in case you think that I'm trying sell you a line or push you into joining some sort of legalistic cult, I want to bring in a pastor much more seasoned, much more intelligent than myself, and give him a chance to have the last word with you as we close.

Here's how John Piper ended a sermon to his church on the matter of church membership:

I close by urging you to pray and to think this through for your own life. The New Testament knows of no Christians who are not accountable members of local churches. . . . "Lone-Ranger Christians" are a contradiction because becoming a Christian means being united to Christ, and union with Christ expresses itself in union with a local body of believers.

. . . Are you an accountable member of a local church? Not just: Is your name somewhere? But, are you committed to discipline and being disciplined according to biblical standards? Have you publicly declared your willingness to be shepherded and to be led by the leaders of a local church? Do you see

yourself and your gifts as part of an organic ministering body? Do you show by your firm attachment to Christ's body that you are attached to Christ?

Church membership is a blood-bought gift of God's grace. More than most of us realize, it is a life-sustaining, faith-strengthening, joy-preserving means of God's mercy to us. I urge you not to cut yourself off from this blessing.³

³ <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/how-important-is-church-membership>.