

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

1 Corinthians 10:16–17

What Is Church Membership (cont'd)?

The Five Aspects of Church Membership

We're in Session II now and the second part to what I've titled: *An Introduction to Church Membership*. In all of our discussion last week we still didn't really answer the question: What is church membership (particularly at a *local* church level)? It is this question that I now want to address with you in earnest. And I'm going to do so by presenting to you what I call the five aspects of church membership.



1. Church Membership Is *Affirmation* from the Elders

I'm going to start with the *process* I have in mind here and then we'll move back towards the *theology* that stands behind it.

THE PROCESS

If an individual feels called to join himself to this church as a Covenant Member, then he would go through the formal process we're developing here, which would land him eventually across the table from an Elder or two for what we are calling the Covenant Membership Conversation.

The purpose of this conversation is threefold:

- It gives you a chance to get to know us and confirm that this is the right local church for you.
- It gives us a chance to get to know you and confirm that you understand that gospel, and that Jesus seems to be your Savior and Lord.
- It begins the beautiful process of being knit together in love as we share stories, hear your heart, and help you along your way to becoming a Covenant Member at Mercy Hill Church.

I say Church Membership is affirmation from the "Elders" in particular here because that's really where the process of affirmation begins. And rightly so. Elders are commissioned by the Holy Spirit through the church to oversee and care for all of its members. They are to lead the way in shepherding the flock, which would mean leading the way in adding to the flock: "Is this a sheep or is this a goat or, worse, is this a wolf?" (cf. Act 20:28-31a).

But the process of affirmation doesn't stop with the Elders, it culminates finally with the whole church. Assuming things progress for the prospective Covenant Member, notice of the Elders' recommendation will be given to the current membership of the church, and they will have an opportunity to bring any concerns they have to the Elders for consideration.

Now, pause. I imagine at this point that, for some of you, your heart is racing, your palms are sweating, your blood pressure is rising. So let me be clear.

We are not talking here about that stuff that goes down on those cop shows you watch on TV before bed. We're not doing some sort of criminal investigation on you—we've got the warrant, we're breaking down your door, and we're going through all your stuff with our magnifying glasses and clipboards.

No! We just want to do our best to confirm that you're a Christian. That's it.

Again, let me be clear.

- We are *not* talking about—"Does this person understand the full index of biblical theology?" We are all growing in our knowledge of Scripture.
- We *are* talking about—"Does this person understand the gospel—that they are a sinner; that they need a Savior; that Jesus died and rose for them?"
- We are *not* talking about—"Does this individual have any sin in their lives?" We all have sin.
- We *are* talking about—"Does this individual have *clear, consistent, calloused* unrepentant sin in his life that brings his profession of faith into question?"
- We are *not* talking about—"Has this person attained perfection?" Is anyone perfect here? This church would be empty if that were the qualification for membership.
- We *are* talking about—"By grace, is this person heading in the right direction?"

We are simply wanting to confirm that this person has a credible profession of faith; that they seem to be Christians—banged-up, sin-struggling, grace-embracing, slowly-growing Christians, just like the rest of us.

Jonathan Leeman writes wonderfully on this subject:

If I . . . were to write a standards guide for those conducting membership interviews, I would go straight to Matthew’s beatitudes. It might read something like this: “Look for the ones who are poor in spirit; who mourn for their sin; who aren’t entitled, always insisting on their own way, but who are meek; who are sick to death of sin and all its nonsense and so hunger and thirst for righteousness like its water. When you find people like that, make sure they know who Jesus is. Make sure Jesus Is the One who fills their impoverished spirit, who has forgiven their sins, who receives their life and worship, and whose righteousness they depend upon and pursue. When you find such people, tell them to join!”

Notice that it’s not a person’s moral perfection that qualifies him or her for church membership. It’s just the opposite. It’s his or her recognition of a lack of moral perfection coupled with a hunger for it. It’s not the people who never sin; it’s the people who fight against sin. A church’s judicial work is to affirm not the righteous but the unrighteous who thirst for righteousness—the righteousness only God in Christ can give.

Here’s one more way to say it: what makes people acceptable to a church is not their own moral purity, but Christ’s—not what they have done to save themselves, but what God has done to save them.¹

Church membership is not a pride thing—“I’m in and you’re out.” No! It’s actually just the opposite. The only way you get in is by finally acknowledging that you’re out—“I’m out of strength; I’m out of righteousness; I’m out of riches; I’m out of options; but I have Christ. Can I come in?” “Yes!”

We are simply wanting to confirm that this person has a credible profession of faith; that they seem to be Christians—banged-up, sin-struggling, grace-embracing, slowly-growing Christians, just like the rest of us.

THE THEOLOGY

Now, I said I’d get to the theology behind this process. Let’s briefly look at some of this now.

What I have in mind here is what’s been referred to as the church’s power of the keys. These keys are first mentioned by Jesus with reference to Peter upon his profession of faith in Jesus as the Christ: “I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you (sg.) bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you (sg.) loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt 16:18–19).

Christ is giving Peter “the keys of the kingdom of heaven”. Keys open doors and let people in. But they also lock doors and put people out. With these keys, Christ is giving Peter the authority to bind or loose, to affirm or reject an individual’s participation in His kingdom and church. Some that try to attach themselves to the church will be bound—affirmed as true believers; others will be loosed—rejected as false professors (we might think of Ananias and Saphira on this point [Acts 5:1-11]).

But then, amazingly, just two chapters later, we see plainly that these keys are not just given by Christ to Peter, they are, in fact, given to the entire church. Speaking of an unrepentant sinner, Jesus instructs His disciples:

¹ *Church Membership* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 88-89.

If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you (pl.) bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you (pl.) loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven . . . For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them. (Matt 18:17–18, 20)

The same key-wielding activity of binding and loosing is referred to—only now the “you” doing it is plural in the Greek. Jesus is talking about the church. He’s talking about you and I.

Have no doubt: these are Christ’s keys; it’s His authority. But He uses those keys, He exercises His authority, through the church! The church is to take part in affirming true believers and rejecting false professors.

I tremble at the thought! This is an awesome task. Please do not ever think that I am looking to monopolize these keys and use them as some sort of power play to manipulate you for selfish gain. There’s a big part of me that doesn’t want the keys. I just want to put them back in Jesus’ hand and say, “You do it! I’m not worthy of such a thing. I’m going to screw it up!” But He wants me to shepherd. He wants me care for the flock. As an Elder, I think he wants me to lead the way in this. But, as His church, He wants all of us involved.

2. Church Membership Is Assurance to the Individual

Now you might think what I just outlined sounds like a horrifying process.

Maybe you’re an introvert, already prone to fear what others are thinking. Maybe you’ve imbibed the full spirit of American individualism—“Get out of my business! Who do you think you are?” Or maybe you’ve suffered painful abuse at the hands of church authority in the past—“You’re just waiting to hurt me, to condemn me, to manipulate me, to embarrass me!” Whatever the case may be, hear me now: this process is not designed to be *horrifying*; it’s actually designed to be *healing*.

We might feel safe doing our Christianity thing on the fringes, but it is actually quite a dangerous place to be. The lone Christian is terribly prone to the errors of either *self-deception* or *self-doubt*.

SELF-DECEPTION

On the one hand, you might be thinking you are just fine—“Me and Jesus are tight.” But maybe you’re not. Maybe you don’t really get the cross. Maybe you’re still living in sin. Maybe you’re self-deceived. Maybe you’re headed towards that haunting verdict described in Matthew 7:22-23: “On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’”

If the devil can keep you thinking you’re fine, doesn’t the devil win?

An Elder Council, a church, that wants to help you avoid this kind of self-deception, is not a horrifying thing. It’s a healing thing. When you do truly come to know Christ, when they do affirm your relationship with Him, it is for your blessed assurance: “As far as this church and its leaders can tell, that Day will go well for me! I will not hear ‘Depart from Me I never knew you’, but ‘Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Master.’”

SELF-DOUBT

On the other hand, you might be terribly prone to doubt your salvation. You might have such a sensitive conscience, and feel so painfully condemned, that you are all but certain that the Elders and the church will turn you away once they really get to know you.

If the devil, the accuser of the brethren, can keep you doubting your salvation, does he not rob you of all the joy that is yours in Christ?

So what then when you finally gain the courage to let the Elders and the church in and they declare: “As far as we can tell, you are the real thing. Rest assured dear sister, dear brother. You are a member of Christ’s body and a member of this church.”

Again, an Elder Council, a church, that wants to help you avoid this kind of self-doubt, is not a horrifying thing. It’s a healing thing.

3. Church Membership Is *Accountability* with the Church

As members of this local expression of Christ’s universal church, we are to be more than just hospitable or charitable to one another (though even this is an astounding miracle)—we are also to be *accountable*.

This means that we are honest with one another—about our lives, about our hearts, about who we really are and what we’re really dealing with. It means that, not only is the front door to my home open to you, but that closet door in the furthest, darkest, back room—where I keep all of my skeletons and cobwebs—that door is open to you as well.

Now, please don’t misunderstand me. I’m not saying we don’t use wisdom in who we share with and how. I’m not saying all of your junk has to be posted to your Facebook wall or something’s gone wrong with you. I am saying, that the strangest thing happens when Christ gets a hold of us: suddenly I want to let you in—I want to confess sin, and get accountability, and open my life up to others.

To be a Christian is to come out of hiding—to come out of darkness and into the light. Jesus says in John 3:19-20: “The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.”

But the Christian is one who says, “I’m done hiding. I need help. And Jesus is the One who can help me.” We step into the light of the cross and find from God not condemnation but salvation. And in the glory of that light, when at last we look to our left and our right, what is it that we see? The church. Brothers and sisters given by God to us as gifts, to keep us living, walking in that light.

Do you remember that horrifying response Cain gave to God after he had murdered his brother Abel and God came to him inquiring of Abel’s whereabouts? “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen 4:9b). The answer to Cain’s question, according to the Bible, with reference to brothers and sisters in the church is: “Yes!”

This is why the author of Hebrews would exhort the church in this way: “[L]et us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 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” (Heb 10:24–25).

There are roaches still crawling in our flesh. There’s a countermovement in us that still longs for the damp darkness of sin. Church membership says: “I want that Day to go well for me and for you. Therefore I want you in my life, and I want to get into yours. I want to be accountable to the church.”

4. Church Membership Is *Announcement* before the World

Let me ask you? Who in this church is representing Christ to the nations? Who among us is a part of that blessed assembly that has unique access to the presence of God, as His people, commissioned for His purpose? Anyone that walks through these doors? Certainly you wouldn’t say so. We have an open door policy here. We want unbelievers, apostates, backsliders, rebels in our midst. But we wouldn’t want the world looking to them to try to discover what Christ is like. So who would we point them to?

Church membership helps us draw a clearer line around those whom we as a church know are walking with Christ, and those whom, either we know aren't, or whom we don't know enough about to say either way. To admit a person into membership is to announce before the world: "If you're wondering what Jesus is all about, look to this brother or sister and you'll soon see!"

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5. Church Membership Is *Ardor* for God's Name

To become a Christian is to take the name of God upon us. We are baptized "in [Gk. 'eis'—lit. 'into'] the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt 28:19). This reality is powerfully pictured for us in what is described of the saints in Revelation 22: "They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads" (v. 4).

So what happens in a country where, according to the Pew Forum, 70% label themselves as Christians? "I'm a Christian. I'm a pretty good person. I go to church on Christmas and Easter. I wear a cross necklace. I don't smoke. I'm certainly not a Buddhist. So I suppose I'm a Christian." You want to know what happens? Christ's name is defiled. Because so many take His name upon themselves without even knowing Him in the first place. People look in and think: "This guy's supposedly a Christian? I want none of that!"

Church membership comes in and says: "Wait a minute. Let's clean up the stats a bit. Not everyone who professes Christ knows Him." It seeks to draw crisper lines between those who seem to be true believers and those who seem only to be false professors, so as to preserve the name of our God. When the church admits someone into membership, we are saying: "Yes, we see that Christ's name is upon you." And, consequently, we promote the assurance of the individual, we protect the purity of the church, we proclaim a clearer message to the world, and we preserve the name and glory of God!

Why "Covenant" Membership?

1. Because It's Strong

Now, I want to close this second session by asking the question: why "Covenant" Membership? I went back and forth on this. But, interestingly, the very reason I initially went back on it is now the reason I am so passionately going forth with it. And that is, namely: it's a strong word. "Covenant". It sounds really serious, almost scary. At first, I hesitated on the word because it makes me think of marriage. It sounds like your joining this church until death do you part, like a cult you can't break free from.

But then, as I've been pastoring here with you for over a year now, I've begun to see just how critical this language is. We are going to get in conflict with each other. We are going to hurt each other. The church isn't always going to meet our needs. Sometimes the music is going to be off key. Sometimes the preaching is going to be too long. Sometimes the people we thought would love us wisely will instead wound us deeply.

So what do we do? Leave? No. We press in. There is a depth of relationship and glory that can only be seen on the other side of covenant. This doesn't mean we're married. But it does mean that we're really serious about this. This doesn't mean your joining a cult and can never get out. But it does mean that you are joining a community and are committed to playing a vital role in it.

My father-in-law was in town a couple of weeks ago and he was bemoaning the fact that the tomato plants in our garden are producing so much more fruit than those in his garden. Megan, being a horticulture major, pointed out that he was probably watering too much, that tomato plants produce more fruit the more they are tested. And I thought, “That’s just like the church! If we’re always going after the water, the comfort, if every time things get tough we up and left, we wouldn’t bear any fruit!”

Covenant Memberships says: “I’m setting my roots down deep in this local community. I know it might get hard. But God’s going to use this. And we’re going to see fruit here. I’m not just looking to come and go, I want to commit and grow!”

*I’m not just looking to come and go,
I want to commit and grow!*

2. Because It’s Biblical

But there’s another reason I chose this word “Covenant”. Not only is it strong, it’s biblical. I wonder if you realize that when God brings people into covenant with Himself, He always brings them into covenant with one another.

The easiest place to see this is with Jesus at the Lord’s Supper. Jesus is sitting down around the table with His guys to celebrate the Passover one last time. The shadow of the cross is heavy upon Him. Death has Him by the ankles. He already knows He’s going to be betrayed by Judas and abandoned by the others—every last one of them will soon scatter to save his own neck.

And yet Jesus doesn’t pull away from them. No! He takes up the bread and the cup, and He presses in, He covenants with them: “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood” (Luke 22:20b). He makes the bread and cup symbols of His body and blood and says: “This is how much I love you...to death. I’m with you in this...to the end. Do you think your sins can keep you from Me? Think again!”

But now here’s the amazing thing: this covenant Christ makes with us, sets up our covenant with one another. Because it’s around a table that this takes place. And there are others seated around this table. It’s not just Him doing this with you and I individually. Suddenly the disciples look around and they realize: “We are in this thing with Him *together*.”

Paul would later spell out this reality for the local church in Corinth: “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor 10:16–17).

The bread which signifies His body broken for us (going from one to many), at the same time signifies His church uniting in Him (going from many to one). He gave His life on the cross so that He might not only call us into covenant with Himself, but into covenant with one another!

Do you see what he just did? He took the elements that Christ used as signs of His covenant with us and he made them signs of our covenant with one another! The bread which signifies His body broken for us (going from one to many), at the same time signifies His church uniting in Him (going from many to one). He gave His life on the cross so that He might not only call us into covenant with Himself, but into covenant with one another!

We meet around this table—like a family dinner—and we feast on the elements that symbolize Christ’s death on a cross for us. May it never be, that around this table we would partake of the very symbols of Christ’s self-sacrificing commitment to us, and then turn and close our hearts against one another! “But you don’t know what they did to me—I could never forgive that.” “But they are just so different from me—I feel too awkward.” “But they’re just so uncool—they’re hurting my rep with the guys at work.” Really? Do we honestly think that Jesus couldn’t say all of this and a million times more to us? But He didn’t pull away, He pressed in—He covenanted.

So as we come to the table on Sundays to partake of the bread and the fruit of the vine, by all means, look up at your Savior. Stand in awe of the cross whereby He receives and covenants with sinners like us. But don’t forget to stop and look around at the brothers and sisters gathered around the table with you—at your family in Christ. When Christ brings us into covenant with Himself, He brings us into covenant with one another!

That’s why we’re calling this “Covenant” Membership.