

Church Membership

Week 2

What is Church Membership and is it important?

Introduction:

Schedule:

Week 1: What is the church and is it important?

Week 2: What is Church Membership and is it important?

Week 3: What are the Church and its membership like?

Week 4: What are the responsibilities and privileges of membership?

Week 5: What do we do if a member does not represent Christ?

Week 6: What will practicing meaningful membership look like?

Week 2:

Q1: What is Church Membership? (who makes up the church)

Church membership is not:

1. Just a name on list.
2. Like a club membership.
3. Friendly group of people who gather to talk about the divine.
4. Like a service provider.
5. A voluntary decision for believers.

Now don't misunderstand. From the non-Christian's standpoint, a local church is a voluntary association. No one has to join. From the standpoint of the Christian life, however, it's not. Once you choose Christ, you must choose his people, too. It's a package deal. Choose the Father and the Son and you have to choose the whole family—which you do *through* a local church.¹

¹ Leeman, J. (2012). *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus* (p. 31). Wheaton, IL: Crossway.

Symptoms of wrong thinking about membership:

- Christians can think it's fine to attend a church indefinitely without joining;
- Christians think of getting baptized apart from joining;
- Christians take the Lord's Supper without joining;
- Christians view the Lord's Supper as their own private, mystical experience for Christians and not as an activity for church members who are incorporated into body life together;
- Christians don't integrate their Monday-to-Saturday lives with the lives of other saints;
- Christians assume they can make a perpetual habit of being absent from the church's gathering a few Sundays a month or more;
- Christians make major life decisions (moving, accepting a promotion, choosing a spouse, etc.) without considering the effects of those decisions on the family of relationships in the church or without consulting the wisdom of the church's pastors and other members;
- Christians buy homes or rent apartments with scant regard for how factors such as distance and cost will affect their abilities to serve their church;
- Christians don't realize that they are partly responsible for both the spiritual welfare and the physical livelihood of the other members of their church, even members they have not met. When one mourns, one mourns by himself. When one rejoices, one rejoices by herself.

The basic problem behind all of these symptoms is the assumption that we have the authority to conduct our Christian lives on our own. (Leeman pg 24)

Church membership is:

Definition of Church Membership: Willing submission to a local community of believers for verification of your Christianity and for in-depth fellowship, ministry, and accountability.

6 Parts to the definition:

1. Willing Submission

1 Timothy 3:4 – 5 (ESV) —4 He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, **5 for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?**

Acts 20:28 (ESV) — 28 Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, **in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God**, which he obtained with his own blood.

Titus 2:15–3:1 (ESV) — 15 Declare these things; **exhort and rebuke with all authority**. Let no one disregard you. **1 Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities**, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work,

1 Peter 5:1–2 (ESV) — 1 So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: **2 shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight**, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly;

1 Thessalonians 5:12–13 (ESV) — 12 We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you **and are over you in the Lord and admonish you**, **13** and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.

Hebrews 13:17 (ESV) — 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.

2. to a (specific) local community of believers

- The first local church was started in Jerusalem (Acts 1 & 2)
- Persecution caused the spread of Christianity and the establishment of new local churches.
- Paul and Barnabas helped start the 2nd major church (Antioch) in Acts 11.
- Antioch commissioned the first missionaries (Acts 13)
- Paul went on to help establish many local churches and install capable pastors.

“What’s the difference between two Christians who belong to the same church and two Christians who belong to different churches?”

If there is *no* difference, then we’d have to say that the local church *does not exist*. It would be like saying there’s no difference between my relationship with my wife and my relationship with other women. That would be true only if the marital covenant *did not exist*. But the marriage does exist, and so there’s a big difference in the relationships. Likewise, the local church does exist, and so it seems as if there should be some difference in those relationships. But what is it?

Here’s the difference: my church and I are capable of exercising formal authority over its members, but is not capable of doing so over non-members. That is, Jesus has given me, as a member of the church, a formal judicial role to play in other members’ Christian lives that he has not given me to play in non-members lives.²

² Leeman, J. (2012). *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus* (p. 50). Wheaton, IL: Crossway.

3. To verify your Christianity

Matthew 7:15 “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

Roman 16:17-18 I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive.

A Helpful Illustration: The Local Church is an embassy

A local church is a real-life embassy that represents Christ’s future kingdom and his coming universal church.

The idea of church membership immediately follows from the picture of the local church. What is a church member? It’s someone who walks through the embassy doors claiming to belong to the kingdom of Christ. “Hello, my name is Christian.” The embassy official taps a few keys on his computer and then says, “Yep, I see your records here. Here’s your passport.” The individual can now enjoy many of the rights, benefits, and obligations of citizenship even though living in a foreign land. But not only that—and here’s the crazy part—the individual becomes part of the embassy itself—one of the officials who affirms and oversees others. To be a church member is *to be* the church, at least a part of it.

A church member, therefore, is someone who is formally recognized as a Christian and a part of Christ’s universal body.

A church member is a person who has been officially and publicly recognized as a Christian before the nations, as well as someone who shares in the same authority of officially affirming and overseeing other Christians in his or her church.

The embassy-like authority of the local church gives individuals who mouth the words, “I’m with Jesus,” the opportunity to demonstrate that those words mean something. The local church guards the reputation of Christ by sorting out the true professors from the false. The local church enables the world to look upon the canvas of God’s people and see an authentic painting of Christ’s love and holiness, not a forgery. And the local church lays down a pathway with guardrails and resting stations for the long journey of the Christian life.³

4. To participate in Christian fellowship

Acts 2:42–47 (ESV) — 42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. **43** And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. **44** And all who believed were together and had all things in common. **45** And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. **46** And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, **47** praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

³ Leeman, J. (2012). *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus* (pp. 28–30). Wheaton, IL: Crossway.

Hebrews 10:23–25 (ESV) — **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.

5. To participate in Christian ministry

Ephesians 4:11–12 (ESV) — **11** And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, **12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry**, for building up the body of Christ,

Romans 12:4–8 (ESV) — **4** For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, **5** so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. **6** Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; **7** if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; **8** the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

6. To be part of the accountability of the church

Galatians 6:1–2 (ESV) — **1** Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. **2** Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

Matthew 18:17 (ESV) — **17** 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.

1 Corinthians 5:4–5 (ESV) — **4** When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, **5** you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

1 Corinthians 5:11–13 (ESV) — **11** But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. **12** For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? **13** God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.”

Q2: Is Meaningful Church Membership important?

- **Yes, Church Membership is Essential: (LFH pg. 42)**

1. Church membership is essential to an orderly administration of the church.

1 Corinthians 14:40 (ESV) — 40 But all things should be done decently and in order.

“The church is likened in the Bible sometimes to a body, sometimes to a family or household, sometimes to a kingdom, sometimes to an army. For any of these organisms to function properly order of some kind is required. The same applies to the church. The church is not just a loose collection of individuals, it is a closely-knit structure like a human body (Eph. 4:16) and has therefore to be rightly organized. For such ordering it needs to know exactly who belongs to it. A family which sat down to its meal-table or locked its doors at night, not knowing who was supposed to be there and who not, would be an extremely strange phenomenon. An army battalion which did not know whom to expect on parade would soon be in chaos. If the church is to be a true family and an effective fighting force it needs to know who exactly belongs to it.”

Eric Lane, *Members of one Another*

Illustration: Golf club membership...

2. Membership clarifies the difference between the church and the world.

1 John 2: 18, 26 Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour.

²⁶ I write these things to you about those who are trying to deceive you.

3. Membership promotes involvement from those on the “fringes” of the church.

Matthew 6:19–21 (ESV) — 19 “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, **20** but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. **21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.**

“This is especially true when they realize they must make a choice between being committed or uncommitted. An emphasis on membership provides a way for people to take a big step in their sanctification by moving from “the crowd” into the “congregation.” They are also more likely to serve in the church when they have made the investment of a membership commitment.”

Wayne Mack

4. Membership provides an opportunity to educate people about the nature and distinctives of the church.

- Process of becoming a church Member

- Membership class
- Signing Church covenant
- Testimony to the church / Baptism

Is it possible to have a vibrant spiritual life and successfully nurture our relationship with God apart from a local church? Is it just “conventional wisdom” that tells us we must be a part of it? Is it possible to move closer to God and farther away from the church? Are there “lots of alternatives” to the church when it comes to our spiritual growth? And are those who forsake all church involvement truly blameless for that choice?

The answer to all those questions, according to scripture, is a resounding no! Far from being only one of many options for the Christian, the church is the primary means through which God accomplishes His plan in the world. It is His ordained instrument for calling the lost to Himself and the context in which He sanctifies those who are born into His family. Therefore God expects (and even demands) a commitment to the church from everyone who claims to know Him.

Wayne Mack

Books used for this study:

Mark Dever – Nine Marks of a Healthy Church
Mark Dever – What is a Healthy Church
Thomas Rainer – I am a Church Member
Rick Thomas – *Preaching Center or Discipleship Community* (article)
Dave Jenkins – *5 Reasons We should Gather in Local Churches* (article)
Wayne Mack & Dave Swavely - *Life in the Father's House*
Wayne Mack – *To Be or Not To Be a Church Member*
Jonathan Leeman – *Church Membership*
Jonathan Leeman – *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love*