

Why Church Membership?

Introduction:

There is an increasing trend amongst Christians in the west to refuse to commit to formal church membership. This tendency is symptomatic of the days of non-commitment, individualism, and consumerism in which we find ourselves. It's become common place to find people attending a church service in order to have their felt needs met, which in turn leads to the notion that church membership is non-essential as it's unlikely to fulfill such needs. Others choose not to commit to local church membership because they genuinely fail to see the biblical warrant for it.

Much of the current debate over the legitimacy and necessity of church membership stems from the fact that there is no explicit scriptural commandment for it. However at Light and Life we would suggest that the absence of any explicit commandment is an indication of the fact that such a command was unnecessary since the New Testament authors assumed that Christians would *naturally* commit to and be apart of a local church. So instead of an explicit command what we find is a broad New Testament principle which we believe shows church membership to be both a valid and biblical concept.

The early church models it:

In Acts 2:41 and Acts 2:47 we find the expression; the Lord was "adding to their number". This phrase suggests that there was a specific number or group of Christians who were together in one place to whom individuals were identifiably added. Latter on in Acts 5:13 we read that "no one else dared join them". Again this suggests that there were a specified group of Christians to whom people become joined as they came to believe in the Lord. Significantly the word 'joined' (kollasyai) means literally 'to glue or weld, to attach one's self to' and is the same word used in Matthew 19:5 of the union between a man and a woman being 'united' in marriage. So the union is not a casual association but a strong and formal commitment with the believers counting and keeping a record of who joined them.

We find in Acts 4:4 that 'the number of men grew to about 5,000', and again in Acts 5:14 'more and more men and women... were added to their number.' Undoubtedly the early church was a visible and identifiable group of people. Then as the good news spread through the missionary journeys of the Apostles more and more people were converted. These new believers joined together in local groups under their own appointed leadership (Tit 1:5), so we read of 'the Church at Jerusalem', 'the Church at Antioch' 'the church in Ephesus,' to name just three.

Each of these churches would have had lists specifying who was apart of them, and when a believer moved from one church to another a letter of commendation was written affirming the faith, character and conduct of the Christian. So we find in Acts 18:27 that the Church in Ephesus wrote to the church in Achaia commending Apollos to them. Likewise Paul writes to the Church in Rome saying of Phoebe 'I commend to you our sister ... I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints' (Rom 16:1).

Clearly the churches knew who belonged where; we find no mention of unaccountable Christians who refused to join a local church. In fact all of the New Testament epistles were either written to local churches or to local church leaders. On that basis one could say that there is no word from God to Christians outside of the local church. So from a New Testament perspective it was unthinkable that someone would choose Christ but not choose to join Christ church. For the early church the natural thing was to join together with other believers as an identifiable member of a local church.

The local church necessitates it:

If people are unwilling to commit and submit to a local church then many of the New Testament exhortations and instructions, which are given for the health and order of the church, actually become nonsensical and inapplicable. For example Heb 13:17 says "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority." The prerequisite for the fulfilment of this imperative is that a believer has chosen to join a church over which there is a leader to obey. We find a similar passage in 1 Thess 5:12 where the believers in Thessalonica are asked to respect those who were over them in the Lord.

Another passage which necessitates church membership is 1 Cor 5:12-13 in which Paul deals with the issue of expelling immoral believers from the local church. He says "What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. "Expel the wicked man from among you." Here there is a clear distinction between those in the Church at Corinth and those outside it. Paul is saying that the church is to judge those inside on moral issues, and where a member persistently, willfully and unrepentantly sins the church is to excommunicate that member. Membership is an essential requirement if this is to happen. You can't be excommunicated if you're never a communicant member in the first place.

Without a system of knowing whose in and whose out, the purity of the church is sacrificed for there can be no disciplining or accountability, instead people come and go as they please. For Pastors to effectively train, support, disciple, instruct, protect, admonish, reprove, rebuke and discipline they need to know whose in the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made them responsible as an overseer (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:1-4).

In addition, without a specified list of members, how does a church decide whose permitted to vote on issues such as the election of deacons (Acts 6:3), and the purchasing of buildings? Scripture tells us that the church must conduct itself in a way which is fitting and orderly (1 Cor 14:4) "for God is not a God of disorder but of peace" (2 Cor 14:33). Such order is essential to the life and health of the church and for such order to be maintained formal church membership is essential.

The nature of the church demands it:

Firstly the church is described as the 'body of Christ' (1 Cor 12:27). By implication this metaphor shows us that the church is not just a loose arrangement of individuals but a tightly knit organism in which every member is interdependent on each other. Every part needs to be able to rely on the other parts to do their job. However if in the church people are unwilling to formally commit to the church in membership how can those who are members count on them? Without a common commitment to one another in membership there can be no accountability.

Secondly the church is likened to an army (Eph 6:10-18; 2 Tim 2:3,4). As with a physical army, the church will never be effective if its soldiers claim to be part of a 'worldwide army' but fail to belong to a specific unit or report to a specific commander. In the same way believers need to be part of a local church, willingly submitting to the leadership God provides.

Thirdly the church is described as 'the family of God' (1 Pet 4:17). In a biological family unit members do not choose to move from one family to another, so why do some Christians move from church to church without sufficient reasons? God describes the church as a family because we are supposed to be closely committed to one another, not only to the 'worldwide extended family,' but to a smaller expression of it. We are to know and be known. As Eric Lane comments, 'A family that sat down to its meal-table... not knowing who should be there... would be an extremely strange phenomenon'.

Conclusion:

From the account of the early church we have seen the clear pattern of churches being established with clearly defined leaders and members. There were letters written to commend believers from

one church to another, and lists were compiled to keep account of who was who, and who was where. In addition we noted how the local church will never be able to function biblically without people being committed to one another in membership. Church discipline and Christian discipleship require a common commitment by all to a specific local church. By refusing to submit and commit to a church we defy our own identity, and forfeit the joy of what it is to be 'one in Christ'. Therefore, we conclude that church membership gives formal shape to what the church has always done; it is an expression of our oneness in Christ and a means of maintaining that unity.