

Church Membership

What Does It Mean

And Where Did The Idea Come From?

“So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another.” [Romans 12:5]



Introduction:

In this study we will look at common teachings about membership in the local church and church attendance and compare those views with what the Bible actually teaches. According to the Bible, true believers are members of the entire body of Christ by the simple fact that they are saved, that they have the Spirit of the Living God dwelling in them. There is no mention in the New Testament of believers “joining a church”. From what the Bible teaches, all we can conclude is that we are born into God’s church (both the corporate and the local church) at the point of salvation, the point at which we become saved, born-again, born from above, etc. We just need to start meeting with and fellowshiping with local believers once we become saved, as mentioned in Hebrews 10:25:

“Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.”

Membership classes:

Taking membership classes and then signing some pledge of membership to a local church is an idea borrowed from the world, not from the Bible. It is based on the idea that commitment is as simple as understanding all the rules and then signing a form stating that you agree to those rules and that you intend to abide by them. However, true commitment among believers in a local congregation should be and can only be based upon **relationships** that are **nurtured** by the very way that the church (household of faith) operates when it gathers together. Having a relationship with God is what enables a person to have a relationship with one’s brothers and sisters in Christ:

1 John 4:20 - “If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?”

Of course we need to conduct ourselves in our relationships in accordance with God’s word, so individually and corporately we need to be reading,

studying and applying God's word.

Membership Criteria

Some professing bible-believing churches will NOT allow Christians to become members if those Christians will not sign a statement saying they agree with ALL the items listed in some "Statement Of Beliefs" of the Church, including issues that many Christians disagree on such as eschatology (i.e. end-time events). How preposterous is that? What if the believer hasn't come to a conclusion on some non-essential doctrine? What if the believer HAS reached a conclusion and determined that the "Statement Of Beliefs" is in error? Shouldn't the people in that local assembly FIX the error in the statement even if it means TAKING THE TIME to hear the views of the one who disagrees with them? Perhaps "Statements Of Belief" should not even exist, since they can cause division in the local body. Other than major issues regarding salvation and the deity of Christ, differences in theology should not be cause for putting up a wall against those who don't see eye-to-eye with church leaders. But basically, this kind of "church membership system" is designed to keep leaders from ever having to admit they are wrong on doctrine, and designed to send people away who care enough about biblical truth to say they have a different point of view on some Bible doctrines.

What kind of members are we supposed to be anyway?

Do we think that God is pleased with us when we gather together in His name, only to ignore all of our brothers and sisters in Christ? What makes us think that God wants this "show" that we put on each Sunday? Worshipping God in Spirit and in truth requires serious commitment to the rest of God's family. For the leadership that means a whole lot more than preaching a nice sermon (and keeping the sheep from asking questions or getting to know each other). It means **leading by example** where the rest of the flock has an opportunity to see how the leaders live, how they interact with their family members and others in **unsanitized** environments. For the rest of the congregation it means seeing how they interact with others also. But it means far more than that. It means using your gifts and talents and resources whenever you gather together and throughout the week, to build up the local body of believers. If the church you are in does not let you exercise your gifts or does not even have a way of you to find out what those gifts are, then leave — and find a place where that can happen. God commands us to use our gifts. Its not an option and its not something just for church leaders to do:

1 Peter 4:10 - "As every man hath received the gift, even so **minister the same one to another**, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God."

Also, a church leader is a counterfeit or unfaithful shepherd if he is not leading **by example** and truly ensuring that the local flock is using its gifts,

being disciplined and making disciples. If Paul could not preach in one synagogue he moved on to another. If a church will not let you become more than just a pew warmer, leave. You probably won't really be missed much anyway except perhaps when it is time to collect the offerings. Dear brethren, we are not admonished to assemble together to warm pews or to play "Simon says" or to sit like ducks in a row listening to the grand and mighty "wizard" of OZ up front (behind or in front of the curtain).

In a conventional church where interaction is limited and highly controlled, (as compared to a highly interactive house church or small group setting), the appointed times that the congregation gathers together do not usually present opportunities for much if any interaction among the "groundlings" (i.e. the laity who are second-class participants in the church meeting). In fact, the conventional church meetings are more like theatrical shows and in effect are merely religious performances that we happen to call "worship services". And in all that time we spend together during those performances we seldom if ever have a chance to find out what is really going on in the lives of those around us who are supposed to be our "brothers" and "sisters". That is very wrong.

What is the purpose of assembling together:

Romans 12:4 - "For as we have many **members** in one body, and **all members have not the same office**"

What does "office" mean? If we look at that word, and its Greek root word, along with how that word is used elsewhere in the Bible, then we might figure out some things about church membership, or at least about being a member of the local body of Christ. The word translated as "office" is the Greek word "praxis":

4234 praxiv praxis prax'-is from 4238; TDNT-6:642,927; n f
AV-deed 4, work 1, office 1; 6
1) a doing, a mode of acting, a deal, a transaction
1a) the doings of the apostles
1b) in a bad sense, wicked deed, crime, wicked doings (our practices i.e. trickery)
2) a thing to be done, business

As we see below, the Greek word "praxis" is usually translated as "deeds" then once as "works" (which is similar to deeds) then once as "office".

Luke 23:51 - "(The same had not consented to the counsel and **deed** <4234> of them;) he was of Arimathaea, a city of the Jews: who also himself waited for the kingdom of God."

Acts 19:18 - "And many that believed came, and confessed, and shewed their **deeds** <4234>."

Romans 8:13 - "For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the **deeds** <4234> of the body, ye shall live."

Colossians 3:9 - "Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his **deeds** <4234>:"

Matthew 16:27 - "For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his **works** <4234>."

Romans 12:4 - "For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same **office** <4234>:"

Believers should be doing their "deeds", or in other words, utilizing the specific gifts that God has blessed them with, to make disciples and to bless others.

Church Membership Versus Church Family:

Bearing one another's burdens

Where do we get our ideas for what we are to do when we get together as a church? The Bible calls the church the "family of God" and the "household of faith" and yet what most churches do when the people gather together is nothing like what most people do when they gather together as a family. It is a fact of life that if we are not spending quality time with one another, in each other's homes or when dining out or when running errands or doing chores or sharing the gospel — interacting together in an informal manner — we are not ever going to be the kind of church that Christ commanded us to be...

**"Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ."
[Galatians 6:2]**

Those who wish to be honest with themselves and with God have got to admit that there is no way to bear one another's burdens if we don't know what those burdens are and if we don't even know all the names of everyone in our congregation. Based on their involvement in the lives of the rest of the members of the local body, you would have to conclude that the members of the average conventional church have no idea what God is talking about in Galatians 6:2. The purpose of the local church gathering together on the Lord's day is not to put on some religious show for God **no matter how many people are doing that** and no matter how long we have been doing that and no matter how many good reasons we can think of for continuing to do things that way.

Conclusion

If we wish to really serve Christ in spirit and in truth, we will do our best to find out what the biblical patterns for church life are and we will do our best to live according to those patterns. [See the article “Biblical Patterns For The Local Church” for more about this]. If we are doing church in a sub-optimal way then we need to stop making excuses and stop doing church in a sub-optimal way... plain and simple. What kind of marriage would you have if you interacted with your spouse the way you interact with the people in church on the Lord’s day?... if you only interacted with your spouse in large groups, in buildings outside the home, and in an environment where you can’t really talk much with the people around you? And what do you know about your pastor? Does he have a good relationship with his wife? Has he ever been married before? How does he relate to his children and them to him. Do you know enough about his PERSONAL LIFE to be able to say if he meets the criteria in scripture (Titus 1, 1Timothy 3) for a church leader? And likewise, how well do you know the personal lives of the elders?... What they do in their “spare” time? How do they relate to their families? How committed they are to sharing the gospel? How much do they encourage others to do so, and equip others to do so, and train others to do so BY EXAMPLE? — *RM Kane*
