

Biblical Defense of Membership

While the word “membership” does not appear anywhere in the Bible, the idea that it represents is present, either implicitly or explicitly, all throughout the New Testament. A definition of church membership is that it is a system that maintains the distinction between the world and the church and in which both a believer makes and maintains a commitment to love, serve, and submit to a local church and the local church makes and maintains a commitment to love, equip, and disciple that believer.

Thus, firstly, church membership makes the clear distinction between the world and the church. In 1 Pet 2:9-10, Peter states that the church is a “chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that [it] may proclaim the excellencies of him who called [it] out of darkness into his marvelous light.” That Peter calls the church a “chosen race, a royal priesthood, and a holy nation” all points the fact that the church is to be distinct from the world so that the church may proclaim the excellencies of God. One of the major ways the church proclaims the excellencies of God is by living lives that reflect the nature and character of God. A church that is not living in obedience to Christ as they have been called and so proclaiming the excellencies of God looks no different from the world and robs God of his glory. Furthermore, it misrepresents God to the world, since the world looks to the church for a picture of the character of God. One purpose of church membership then is to hold believers of the local body accountable to living holy lives so that the world sees an accurate picture of God.

Church discipline, which in cases of last resort is the removal of church membership from a believer, when practiced as given in both Matthew 18:15-20 and 1 Cor. 5, is a practical way in which church membership works to preserve the distinction between the church and the world. These passages also more clearly show the distinction that should exist between the world and the church. In both texts, excommunication from the local church is the final step in church discipline for an unrepentant believer. That a believer can be “cast out” gives a clear picture that the church in Corinthians was organized such that it was very clear who belongs to the church body and who does not. Jesus’ command to treat the unrepentant believer who “refuses to listen to the church” to be as “a Gentile and a tax collector” shows that 1) there is a defined body of believers who handle extreme cases of church discipline and 2) that those inside the church are viewed differently from those who are outside the church. Furthermore in 2 Cor 2:5-11, Paul tells the church at Corinth how to receive someone who has been subject to church discipline after he has repented. Paul states that “for such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough.” This implies that the church at Corinth was made up of a definite number of believers, enabling Paul to speak of this punishment imposed by the majority.

Secondly, church membership makes clear which believers belong to which specific bodies. That a believer makes a commitment to a specific body is important for at least three reasons.

1) The biblical command to all believers is that they “obey [their] leaders and submit to them” (Heb 13:17, also see 1 Pet 5:5). That believers are told to “obey [their] leaders” and not just “obey leaders” implies that there are specific church leaders to whom an individual believer is to submit to and that there exist other church leaders to whom the individual believer is not called by God to submit to. Church membership then is a formal and public commitment of the believer to submit to the church leadership over a specific body.

2) In the same verse in Hebrews, it is stated that church leaders are “keeping watch” over the souls of those under them “as ones who will give an account.” This verse then gives a great weight to church leaders as they will be held accountable to God for the way they lead those whom they are over, thus church leaders knowing who they are accountable for leading should be of great importance to them. Furthermore in 1 Pet 5:2-3, it is made clear that church leaders are given a specific number of believers to lead and they do not

have the same obligations to those who are not under their charge. In light of this, in a believer becoming a member of a local church, the church leaders are making a formal and public commitment to lead, protect, serve, and equip that believer as they have been commanded by God to do.

3) Finally, the believer making a commitment to serve Christ in a local body is important because it gives a context for obeying the “one another” commands that are found all through the New Testament. To take one such command as an example to show how church membership helps believers obey these commands, consider Paul’s command to the Galatians to “bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2). It is clear that this command will most often be obeyed in the context of believers who are living life together and helping one another follow Christ, i.e. in the context of a local church body. While some financial and service burdens can be met by believers who are not apart of one another’s lives, spiritual and emotional needs cannot be met by people who are not a part of the needy’s life. Consider even the previous verse in Galatians 6: “if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him...” How can someone confront another brother in sin if they are not in one another’s lives so that that sin can be seen and confronted? This same logic can be applied to the other “one another” commands. How can I outdo a brother in showing honor to him if I never see him (Rom 12:10)? How can I be kind and tenderhearted to my brothers, forgiving them, if I am not apart of their lives? It is clear then that the context for obeying many of the commands given in the New Testament is a local church body where the members are a part of one another’s lives, holding one another accountable to follow Christ obediently, loving and serving one another, and discipling and encouraging one another. This is not to say that believers should **only** obey the “one another” in the context of their fellow church members. Where God gives believers the means and opportunity to serve their fellow brothers and sisters outside of their local church, they should do so joyfully, but it is to say that the local church should be where believers are being especially intentional about fulfilling these commands since the church members are in one another’s lives and therefore know one another’s needs better than those outside the body.

by

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