

Covenant Membership

Session 1: An Introduction to Church Membership (Part 1)

Introduction

Key Text

“¹² Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. ¹⁴ For the body does not consist of one member but of many...²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1 Cor 12:12–14, 27).

With Trepidation and Great Expectation

- A. We begin this morning what I anticipate will be a **six-week** Covenant Membership Series. We’re going to deal with the subject of **church membership** in **general** and church membership at Mercy Hill in **particular**.
- B. There is much in this subject that causes me **trepidation**. For I know that a topic like church membership **grates** against the **current climate** of our **culture** and the **natural drift** of our **flesh**.
 1. Our culture prizes **individualism**—“Get out of my **business**. Sure I’m a Christian, but it’s just **me and Jesus**. I don’t need the church getting in the **way**!”
 - a. But **church membership** presses in and says: “No! We’re in this thing **together**—I need you in my life; and you need me in yours!”
 2. Our culture has so fostered **consumerism**—“I’m here only so long as you meet my **needs**; when you stop **satisfying** me, I stop coming!”
 - a. But **church membership** presses in and says: “No! Though I’m a **mess**, and you’re a mess; though I’m going to **hurt** you, and you’re going to hurt me; I’m **committing** to you. Not only are we in this Christian life thing **together**, we are in it for the **long haul**.”
 3. Our culture preaches **tolerance** as the highest of virtues—“What’s **true for you** is true for you, but don’t you try to tell me what’s true for me. Don’t you get all **dogmatic**!”
 - a. But **church membership** presses in and draws **hard lines** of **truth** in **love** and says with great **joy** that some appear to be **in**, and with great **sorrow** that others appear to be **out**.

- C. So I don't suppose that these next six weeks are going to be **easy**, but I do anticipate that they will be **glorious**! In spite of my **trepidation**, I enter into this with you with **great expectation**. Because Church Membership, I believe, though it might not matter all that much to some of us, matters greatly to God.

Administrative Introduction

- A. You may have noticed that, while I provided you with a **notebook**, it seems strangely **empty** for a six-week sermon series. And that is because all you received today was **this week's material**. I'm **developing** the material as we progress and will bring in each week a new packet containing both session notes and appendices for you to put in your binders. So, if you can remember, please bring your notebooks back **each week**.
- B. Let me give you a quick **outline** of the six sessions so you have some idea of where we're headed:
1. An Introduction to **Church Membership** (Part 1)
 2. An Introduction to **Church Membership** (Part 2)
 3. An Introduction to **Mercy Hill Church**
 4. Our **Faith**: How We Know and Love the Lord
 5. Our **Community**: How We Know and Love the Church
 6. Our **Mission**: How We Know and Love the World
- C. Finally, before jumping to this morning's session, let me address a few **important questions** you may be asking at this point:
1. **What if I'm already a member?**
 - a. I've only been at this church for a little over a **year** now. **Steve Fuller** before me had established a **church membership** process, and some of you have already gone through that and joined this church. And my ministry has been the **richer** for it!
 - b. Please know that I am so **grateful** for your commitment to this church. I do not in any way consider your previous commitment as **void** or **invalid**. I am only, in light of the change in **senior leadership**, calling you to what we might call "**covenant renewal**".
 - i. Consider how Israel handled the change in leadership from **Moses to Joshua** as they entered into a new season as the people of God. They cross through the Jordan River and the first thing they do is mark off this new season by engaging in **covenant renewal**—they **circumcise** all the males that had been born during the 40 years of wilderness wandering, and they celebrate the **Passover** together (**Josh 5**).

(1) It's as if they were saying: "Though what's happening here is an **old thing** rooted back in Abraham and the Exodus, it is

also a new thing, and we want to **renew** that **old covenant** in this new season."

- c. Mercy Hill Church still owes its **existence** to the **grace** of God and the **labor** of Steve Fuller, but I'm a **new leader**. And as such, it would so bless me to renew that covenantal commitment with you in light of this new season.

2. **What if I'm not ready to be a member?**

- a. By preaching through this series during our **Sunday Service**, I am in no way attempting to **coerce** you into formally joining this church. You should feel a **freedom** to **engage** the subject, **ask** questions, **pray** deeply, and make a Spirit-led **decision** to either move forward in the process or not. I'm just so **grateful** you're here!

3. **What if I'm just a visitor?**

- a. I realize that this might be a lot to take in if you are just visiting and checking us out. What you will be receiving on these Sundays is obviously not what the **typical diet** of this church is. I preach **expositionally**, through **texts** and **books** of the Bible. We have all our sermons **online** if you are curious as to what that looks like. But, still, this actually might be a **great place** for you to start in with us. You'll get a sense right away of who we are and what we're all about!

4. **What if I'm not a Christian?**

- a. I pray you see something **alluring**, something **compelling**, something **glorious** in God's vision for the church, and that you would come into it, through **Christ crucified**.

D. So we begin! **Session 1: An Introduction to Church Membership (Part 1)**...

What Is the Church?

One Blessed Assembly with Three Distinct Aspects

- A. It occurs to me that, before I can effectively introduce church membership, I should **back us up** and ask: **What is the church in the first place?**
 - 1. It's a question we all imagine we could answer quite **simply**, but when we start to make an attempt, we come to face the **complexities** of it. What is the church? What exactly are we **doing here**?
- B. Here's my humble attempt at a definition: The church is that **blessed assembly** that exists in the **presence** of God, as the **people** of God, with the **purpose** of God.

1. **One** blessed assembly, **three** distinct aspects.

The Church in Redemptive History

- A. I've defined the church using these **broad terms** so as to help us see that the church is not merely a **NT reality**—as if things went terribly wrong with **Adam** and, later, **Israel** so he opted for **Plan C** with “the **church**”—but a reality that God has been after with us from the **very beginning**.

(1) The First Adam

- A. Consider **Adam and Eve**.

1. In an **overflow** of joy and love, God creates them and sets them in the **garden sanctuary** of Eden where He would **walk** with them ([Gen 3:8](#)). His holy **presence** was in their midst.
2. And they were to be His **people**. It was **not good** for man to be alone so “*God created man in his own image . . . male and female he created them*” ([Gen 1:27](#)). And He brought them into **covenant** relationship with **Himself** and with **one another**.
3. And He gave to them the unique **purpose** of **ruling** with Him over the creation and **bearing** fruit, **multiplying**, and **filling** it with more people bearing His image, until His glory filled the earth like the waters cover the sea.

- B. In this sense, **humanity** was created, from the **start**, to be **the church**—to be that blessed assembly that exists in the **presence** of God, as the **people** of God, for the **purpose** of God.

1. But we would **not** have it! We **abandoned** His presence, **broke** our fellowship with each other, and started living, not for the purpose of God, but for **ourselves**. And the world went **dark**.

(2) The Second Adam

- A. But God was not satisfied to let the story end here. He begins a **countermovement** with **Israel** that, through many **ups-and-downs**, ultimately culminates in the arrival of the **Christ**, Jesus, the **light** of the world (Joh 1:9), **Immanuel**—God with us ([Matt 1:23](#)).

1. And through Jesus' **life**, **death**, and **resurrection**, broken humanity finally starts to get put **back together**. **Redemption** is a **restart**. **Redemption** is a **rehumanization**.

- a. All that was **lost** in **Adam** is **regained** in **Christ**!

- B. Listen to how **Peter** describes the church as it has been **reconstituted** around Jesus: “⁹ *You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, **that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light**.* ¹⁰ *Once you were not a people, but now you are **God's people**; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy*” ([1 Pet 2:9–10](#)).

1. Did you hear it? (1) The **Presence** of God—we've been "*called...into His marvelous light*" (v. 9b); (2) The **People** of God—"once [we] were not a people but now [we] are God's people" (v. 10a); (3) The **Purpose** of God—that we might "*proclaim the excellencies of Him*" to others, and yet once more fill the earth with **renewed image-bearers** (v. 9b).
- C. And with Christ now at the **helm**, this **ship** will reach it's **final destination**: "¹ Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, '*Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God*'" (Rev 21:1–3).
1. It is no coincidence that when **John** sets out to describe the new heavens and new earth for us in **Rev 20-21** he **invokes** the imagery of **Eden**. The **tree of life forbidden** to Adam and Eve after the fall (**Gen 3:22-24**) is finally **granted** to the church on that last eternal day (**Rev 22:2, 14**).
 - a. God's original plan for **humanity** as the **church**—in His Presence, as His People, with His purpose—will be fully realized in the end through **Christ**!

(3) The Space Between

- A. But we're not in **Rev 21** yet, are we? No! We're back in **1 Pet 2**. We're **shining lights** in a **dark world**, calling **sinners** back to God through the **Savior**. We have God's **presence**, we are God's **people**, we live for God's **purpose**, but we're not yet **home**. We're still somewhere in the **middle** of the story.
1. And as such, we are both an **echo of Eden** and a **foretaste of heaven**. We are **the church**!

What Is Church Membership?

From Universal to Local

- A. So, with this definition in view, what then is **church membership**? How do I become a part of that **blessed assembly**?

(1) The Universal Church

- A. Church membership **broadly** conceived, takes place simply by coming to **Jesus** in **repentance** and **faith**. When the **gospel** is **proclaimed**, and our hearts are **regenerated**, and we **repent** of our sin and **trust** in Him as our Savior, we are **united** to Him, and become a **member** of His body, the church.

1. We are referring here to what has been called the **universal** church (church with a **capital C**). The universal church is that which spans **all time** and **all space**. It is the **sum total** of all who have been united to the Son through the ages.
- B. It's the universal church that the author of **Hebrews** has in mind when he writes: "²² *You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,* ²³ *and to the assembly ['church'] of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,* ²⁴ *and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant*" (Heb 12:22–24a).
1. When you **bow your knee** to Christ, your name is written in the **roll-sheet** of heaven, the **Lamb's book** of life, and you become a member in His **universal church**, and are granted the privilege of participating in this kind of **cosmic worship service**!

(2) The Local Church

- A. But it is not so much membership in this broad sense that we are **concerned with** here this morning is it? I doubt any would **question** the validity of church membership along these lines.
 1. But O how things get a bit **confusing**, even **controversial**, when we start to consider church membership in a **narrower** sense—when we start considering membership in the **local** church (church with a **lower-case c**).
 - a. If the universal church is that which spans **all** time and **all** space, the local church is that which is confined to this **particular time** and this **particular space**—like **Mercy Hill Church**.
- B. So what should **church membership** look like at this **local level**? Is such a thing even **important** or **biblical**?

Distinguished But Not Divided

- A. The **NT** would certainly lead us to think so. While it **distinguishes** between the universal and local church, it sees **no division** between them. To be a part of the **universal** church necessarily meant that you would be part of a **local** church (and vice versa).
 1. Indeed, one's **membership** in the **universal** church is always **concretely expressed** through vital membership in a **local** church. There are no **drifting** Christians; they are all **anchored** concretely in local assemblies.
 - a. As Douglas Millar writes: "*In the New Testament there is no such person as a Christian who is not a church member. Conversion was described as 'the Lord adding to the church' (Acts 2:47). There was no spiritual drifting.*"
 - i. If you were coming to **Christ**, you were coming into the **local church**. **Period**.

- B. And, to put it **conversely**, by coming into the **local church** you were coming into the **church universal**. Which is why Paul would open his letter in **1 Cor 1:2**: *“To the church of God that is in Corinth [local], to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours [universal].”*
1. The **local** assembly is the **gateway** into the **universal** assembly. Amazingly, the **only way** to really enter into **Heb 12** kind of **cosmic worship**, is through the **little assemblies** of local churches!
 - a. I hope you never look at our **fluorescent lights, dusty floors, wrinkled curtains** in the same way again. When you come through the doors of this **elementary school**, you are ascending **mount Zion**. We’re touching heaven in this place!
- C. Now there are **droves** of professing Christians in our day that **reject** almost everything I just said: *“Give me the **universal** church but don’t make me commit to the **local** church. It just **slows me down**, gets **in the way** of my walk with Christ, it’s just an **outdated institution**. It brings more **shame** to Christ’s name than honor.”*
1. I don’t want us to feel that way about **this** or **any** local church. Christ shed His **blood** for this local church (**Act 20:28**)!

Four Strands of Biblical Evidence for Local Church Membership

- A. Let’s quickly consider **four strands** of biblical evidence that seem to indicate the **importance** that the **early church** placed on **local church membership**.

1. While we cannot say that a **formal process** of church membership is **clearly articulated** for us here, we can say that something of the like is **clearly implied**.

(1) It Is Implied in the Records Kept by Local Churches

- A. Consider the NT church’s **origin** there in **Jerusalem**. On the day of **Pentecost**, after the **outpouring** of the Spirit, and the **preaching** of Peter, we read that *“those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about **three thousand souls**” (Act 2:41).*
1. And they **immediately** come into the **local covenant community** of believers: *“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (v. 42).*
- B. Similar statements are made in **2:47**; **4:4**; **5:14**; and **11:24**. We get this sense that as people were **added** to the church, **numbers** were kept. Not because they were concerned with numbers **in themselves**, but because they were concerned **pastorally** for each **soul**.
1. It seems they had some way of **keeping track** of who was coming in (cf. **1 Tim 5:3-16** and the enrollment of widows).

(2) It Is Implied in the Leader-Member Dynamics of Local Churches

- A. The clearest text for this is [Heb 13:17](#): “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.”
1. **Matt Chandler**, the lead pastor of a church in Dallas, and the President of the Acts 29 Network of which we are a part, writes of his wrestling through the issue of **local church membership**. And he points to this verse as the **lynchpin**. Reflecting on it, he writes: *“Two questions occurred to me. First, if there is no biblical requirement to belong to a local church, then which leaders should an individual Christian obey and submit to? Second, and more personally, who will I as a pastor give an account for? . . . Regarding the first question, the Scriptures clearly command Christians to submit to and honor an elder body (Heb. 13:17, 1 Tim. 5:17). If there is no understanding of local church membership, then who are we to submit to and obey? Is it anyone with the title elder from any church? Should you as a Christian obey and submit to those loons at Westboro Baptist? In order to obey Scripture, must you picket soldiers’ funerals, as the pastor of Westboro seems to imply? Regarding the second question, the Scriptures clearly command an elder body to care for specific people (1 Pet. 5:1-5; also, Acts 20:29-30). Will I as a pastor be held accountable for all the Christians in the Dallas Metroplex? There are many churches in Dallas that I have strong theological and philosophical differences with. Will I give account for what they teach in their small group, how they spend their money, and what they do concerning international missions?”*
- B. For [Heb 13:17](#) to make any sense, It seems that the early church **members** must have had a clear idea of who these **leaders** were that they were to **submit** to, and that the early church **leaders** had a clear idea of who these **members** were that they would give an **account** to God for (those whom God had put “in [their] charge [‘lot’; ‘share’]” [\[1 Pet 5:3\]](#)).
1. It seems they had some way of **drawing these lines**.

(3) It Is Implied in the Practice of Church Discipline and Excommunication by Local Churches

- A. [Mat 18:15-17](#) and [1 Cor 5](#) in particular talk about putting a person **out** of the church due to **clear, consistent, calloused, unrepentant** sin.
1. But how can you **formally** put someone **out** if they were never **formally** brought **in**? We’ll look more at this more in later session when we come to “Our Community”, Lord willing.

(4) It Is Implied in the Metaphors Used to Describe Local Churches

- A. Local churches are described as: (1) **flocks**—composed of **sheep** ([Act 20:28](#); [1 Pet 5:2-3](#)); (2) **temples**—composed of **living stones** ([Eph 2:19-22](#); [1 Pet 2:5](#)); (3) **households**—composed of

family members ([1 Tim 3:15](#)); and, as I read to open this sermon, (4) **bodies**—composed of *body parts*, or *members* ([1 Cor 12](#)).

1. Each of these metaphors push us to see the local church as composed of **distinct** yet **vitaly connected** members.
- B. Whether there was a **formal membership** process or not, it is **clear** that these individual believers had **joined together** in some **radically significant** way.
1. When one **sheep** goes missing, the **good shepherd** recognizes it right away and leaves the **99** to go after him.
 2. When a **stone** is pulled from the wall of our temple, who doesn't notice the **gaping hole** left in its place?
 3. When a **family member** has gone AWOL, **family meals** around the table just aren't the same.
 4. When a **hand** is removed from the body, every body part **suffers** the loss.

Formally Encouraging What the Scriptures Already Require

- A. It might be that all this evidence **finally implies** is that the early local churches of the NT had some sort of **informal understanding** of church membership.
1. Certainly we are not to suppose that they had some **database** on their computer where they saved **applications**, **interview notes**, **signed covenants**, and **directory info**. Whatever they did, they did it **differently** than we are going to do it here.
 - a. But it does seem clear **they did something**, that they approached the issue in some way. And we should do **the same**.
- B. By calling our church into covenant membership, I am not trying to **go beyond** what the Scriptures teach. I am actually just trying to **formally encourage** in our church what the Scriptures **already require** of us.
1. We're supposed to know **who's being added** to our assembly by the Lord.
 2. **Members** are supposed to **submit** to, **obey**, and **honor** their leaders.
 3. **Leaders** are supposed to **oversee**, **shepherd**, and **care** for the members under their charge.
 4. When members or leaders are hardened in **unrepentant sin**, we're supposed to have clear ways of **removing** them from the communion of this church so as to warn the **sinner**, protect the **church's** purity, and preserve the honor of **Christ**.
 5. We are all supposed to be in **intimate**, **committed**, **vital communion** with one another.

- C. A **formal process** of church membership simply **encourages** all of these things and helps to provide a **framework** for developing them in our church.

The Realities Behind the Formalities

- A. So let me be clear: I don't so much care if you **sign your name** on the line at the end of this series or not. The **formalities** of church membership are not what I'm after. I'm after the **realities** that stand behind them. That's what's important.
1. Are you a **born again, committed, accountable, vital part** of this local body or not?
 - a. If you answer "**Yes**" to that question, then why not make it **official** by covenanting with us as a member. Let it be known that you're **all in**, that you're not just wanting to **date** the church but to commit to her.
 - b. But if you answer "**No**" to that question, then there are much more **significant matters** to talk about than just putting your **name** on some line.
 - i. Are you truly **born again**?
 - ii. Is there some **sin** in life that you're hiding, and you want to keep the church at a distance?
 - iii. Have you been **wounded** by the church in the past and now you're afraid to press in?
 - iv. Or is this the **right local church** for you? I'd be sad if it wasn't, but I want you to find a place you feel you can commit to.
- B. In case you're not yet sure you **trust me** on the issue, in case you think that I'm trying to push you into joining some sort of **legalistic cult** or whatever, I want to bring in a pastor much more **seasoned**, much more **intelligent** than myself and give him a chance to have the **last word** with you as we close.
1. Here's how **John Piper** closed a sermon to his church on the matter of church membership: *"I close by urging you to pray and to think this through for your own life. The New Testament knows of no Christians who are not accountable members of local churches. . . . 'Lone-Ranger Christians' are a contradiction because becoming a Christian means being united to Christ, and union with Christ expresses itself in union with a local body of believers.*
. . . Are you an accountable member of a local church? Not just: Is your name somewhere? But, are you committed to discipline and being disciplined according to biblical standards? Have you publicly declared your willingness to be shepherded and to be led by the leaders of a local church? Do you see yourself and your gifts as part of an organic ministering body? Do you show by your firm attachment to Christ's body that you are attached to Christ?
Church membership is a blood-bought gift of God's grace. More than most of us realize, it is a life-sustaining, faith-strengthening, joy-preserving means of God's mercy to us. I urge you not to cut yourself off from this blessing."